Parable of the Sower

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

Octavia E. Butler was an only child. Her mother was a maid and her father was a shoeshine man who died when Butler was seven. Her family were devout Baptists, and were very poor. Butler showed an early interest in science fiction and began writing in childhood. She attended Pasadena City College at night, graduating with an associate of arts degree in History. She later enrolled in writing classes at Cal State LA, UCLA extension school, and the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. In 1984, Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" won the Hugo Short Story Award, and the following year her collection of short stories, *Bloodchild*, won the Nebula and Hugo Awards as well as other prizes. In 1995, Butler won a MacArthur Fellowship. Many of Butler's novels—including *The Parable of the Sower*, its sequel *The Parable of the Talents*, and the neo-slave narrative *Kindred*—are considered to be among the most important works of 20th century American literature. Despite this, Butler spent most of her life in poverty and was forced to work several jobs in order to survive, waking up to write in the middle of the night. She also suffered from depression. She died suddenly from a fall at only 58; it is not clear whether the cause of her death was a stroke, whether she died as a result of head injuries from the fall, or whether it was a combination of both.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Parable of the Sower is set between the years 2025-27, and thus the world events that occur in the novel range from the historically accurate to the speculative. One of the most important historical events in the novel is the system of chattel slavery that existed in America between the 17th-19th centuries. Lauren makes many references to slavery throughout the novel, noting that several elements of society in the antebellum era (such as anti-literacy rules) have returned in the 21st century United States. The book also highlights the fact that even after the formal abolition of slavery in the United States in 1863, various forms of legalized or unofficial slavery continued to be in operation. For example, Bankole mentions the fact that debt slavery—which is widespread at the time the narrative is set—also existed in the 1990s (when Butler was writing the novel). One of the most fascinating things about reading *The Parable of the Sower* in the present is the extraordinary extent to which Butler predicted many of the issues afflicting the contemporary United States. In the novel, the US is struck by extreme weather events induced by climate change, as well as corresponding outbreaks of disease. And in *The Parable of the Talents*, a new presidential candidate, Andrew Steele Jarret, sparks a violent movement centering around his promise to "Make America great again."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Parable of the Sower is one of many science fiction novels that explores the possibility of what life would be like in an apocalyptic landscape. One of the most similar texts to *Parable* is Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, which—like Butler's novel—tells the story of a young black girl living in a dangerous, barren landscape, and who possesses a powerful religious intuition. Other science fiction texts that explore life in an apocalyptic environment include Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, Walter Mosley's *Futureland*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*. Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* depicts a future in which corrupt corporations have taken over cities; it is plausible that this novel could be among the old science fiction books that Lauren discusses when she learns about the KSF takeover of Olivar.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Parable of the Sower*
- **When Written:** 1989-1993
- **Where Written:** California, USA
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** 20th century American Fiction
- **Genre:** Apocalyptic Science Fiction
- **Setting:** Robeldo, a fictional city in California; various locations along the coast of California; Mendocino, California
- **Climax:** When Lauren's neighborhood is set on fire and its residents massacred; the mass funeral at the end of the novel
- **Antagonist:** To some extent, the many different violent groups of people who repeatedly attack Lauren and her group—in particular pyro addicts—are the antagonists of the novel
- **Point of View:** Lauren Olamina (writing in her diary)

EXTRA CREDIT

Unfinished business. *The Parable of the Sower* was supposed to be the first book in a trilogy. However, after publishing the second book in the series, *The Parable of the Talents*, Butler found the research for the final one so demoralizing that she abandoned the project altogether.

Lone wolf. Butler was extremely shy as a child, and as an adult described herself as "solitary" and "a hermit."

PLOT SUMMARY

It is the year 2024, the night before Lauren Olamina's 15th birthday (and Lauren's father's 55th). Lauren has a dream in which she is teaching herself to fly, but ends up flying into a wall of fire. Later, she and her stepmother, Cory, discuss the fact that now there is no light pollution, and people can see the stars again. Although Lauren has stopped believing in her father's religion, she is about to let herself be baptized. Lauren and the other kids being baptized are making a special trip beyond their neighbor wall to a real church for the occasion. They live in Robledo, a city 20 miles outside Los Angeles. The people living outside their neighborhood wall are homeless, mutilated, and wounded, which makes it difficult for Lauren to be around them. She suffers from hyperempathy as a result of her mother's drug abuse during pregnancy, a condition that means she feels other people's pleasure and pain.

Meanwhile, an astronaut named Alicia Leal has died on a mission to Mars. One of the presidential candidates, Christopher Donner, has vowed to eradicate the space program in order to save money, but Lauren believes that space is the future. Mrs. Sims, a devoutly Christian woman in Lauren's neighborhood, has killed herself even though she believes suicide is punished by hell. Christopher Donner wins the election.

A year later, in 2025, a three-year-old girl in the neighborhood called Amy Dunn sets fire to her family's garage. Amy is the product of incestuous rape; her mother, Tracy, was only 12 when she became pregnant with her. Mrs. Sims' cousins Wardell Parrish and Rosalee Payne move into her empty house. Lauren doesn't trust the Payne-Parrish family. Lauren goes to target practice along with her boyfriend Curtis Talcott and his brother Michael, as well as Peter Moss. Peter is the son of Richard Moss, a "total shit" with three wives who practices his own highly patriarchal religion, a mix of West African traditions and Old Testament teachings. The group encounter a feral dog; Lauren's best friend, Joanne Garfield, panics. Lauren shoots the dog and almost collapses from the pain.

It rains for the first time in 6 years. The next day, Lauren learns that Amy has been shot dead by someone shooting through the neighborhood gate. Joanne comes over for lunch in Lauren's room, and the two discuss the future of the neighborhood. Lauren admits that she doesn't think the neighborhood will be secure for much longer and that she has been reading books to help her prepare for survival. Joanne is skeptical and accuses Lauren of reading "too many adventure stories." Joanne tells her mother about this conversation, which causes Lauren's father to have a stern conversation with her. However, he eventually agrees to make emergency "earthquake" packs and set up a nightly neighborhood watch.

Lauren has devised a name for her own religious beliefs: Earthseed. She believes that the future of this religion is to spread human life throughout the universe. She collects her writings about Earthseed into a single notebook and hopes that one day she will use this to teach others. The day before Lauren's 16th birthday, Tracy walks out of the neighborhood gate and never returns. Lauren knows that people in the neighborhood expect Lauren to marry her boyfriend Curtis and have children, but this is not the future she wants for herself.

Lauren's 12-year-old brother Keith steals Cory's key and leaves the neighborhood. When he eventually returns, he is wounded and filthy, and some of his clothes have been stolen. Lauren's father is furious; Keith sulks. Some time later, Lauren's father and Cory give Keith a BB gun for his birthday. Keith disappears, and comes back two days later with new clothes and shoes. He then goes out and returns again with a roll of cash.

A year later, in 2026, Keith is almost 14 and very tall. He is living in a building outside the neighborhood. He and Lauren have a friendly conversation while she is making dinner; even though she knows he is hiding the fact that he is involved in illegal activity, their relationship is closer than before. Keith tells Lauren about a drug called pyro that makes people set fires. Two days later, Keith is found dead. His body has been mutilated, which suggests he was killed by drug dealers. Cory can't stop crying, but neither Lauren nor her father cry.

Meanwhile a company called KSF has taken over the coastal city of Olivar and is inviting people to come and live there. Lauren's father is skeptical about this scheme, but Cory expresses interest in moving there. Lauren decides to call her book of Earthseed scripture *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*.

Joanne and her family are accepted by KSF to move to Olivar. A few days later, Lauren's father doesn't come home from work. Lauren and other neighborhood residents search for him, but find nothing. Lauren preaches at the Sunday church service in place of her father.

Lauren's family hold a funeral for her father even though they still don't know what happened to him. Lauren and Curtis have sex and discuss going north together. A few days later, someone sets fire to the Payne-Parrish house, and all the Paynes die in the blaze. Wardell stays at Lauren's house, where he refuses to eat and behaves erratically.

Seven months later, Lauren wakes to the smell of burning. Intruders have driven a truck through the neighborhood gate and pyro addicts with their skin painted bright colors have set fire to the buildings. Lauren runs through the neighborhood, past dead bodies. She hides in an abandoned garage outside the neighborhood gate.

In the morning, Lauren returns to find the neighborhood destroyed. She goes into her house and takes essential supplies including clothes, bathroom items, money, and her emergency

pack. She sees the bodies of Richard Moss and Michael Talcott lying on the street. She is approached by Zahra Moss, Richard's youngest wife, and Harry Balter. Zahra tells Lauren that Cory and her brothers are all dead. Lauren tells Zahra that Richard is dead, and Zahra bursts into tears. Zahra explains that Richard "bought" her from her mother when she was 15 and homeless. Lauren tells Zahra and Harry that she is planning on going north. Harry agrees to come along, and Lauren decides to dress in drag in order to attract less attention. Zahra eventually agrees to come too.

Lauren, Harry, and Zahra stock up on essential supplies at a nearby mall. They then journey to the 101, where there are hundreds of other people walking north. They are careful not to trust the people around them, knowing that even those who look harmless can be secretly dangerous. At night, they take turns keeping watch. During Harry's turn, a man attacks him, trying to steal his gun. Lauren cracks the man's skull with a rock, then slits his throat in order not to feel his pain. This upsets Harry, but Lauren insists that she wouldn't have killed him unless she knew he would die anyway. She also tells Harry and Zahra about her hyperempathy, and Zahra notes that where she comes from, most babies were born with drug-related abnormalities. Later, Lauren shows Harry the first lines of Earthseed scripture: "All that You touch / You change, / All that you Change / Changes you… God is Change."

The trio see another enormous fire as they walk north. That night, Harry and Zahra have sex during Harry's watch. Lauren sternly urges Harry to be more careful. Back on the road, they intervene in the attempted robbery of a young interracial family: two parents and their baby. Lauren believes the family will join them, as they are natural "allies." They reach the ocean, and Lauren manages to set up a water filtration system to make the ocean water drinkable. A dog approaches the interracial family, who have camped nearby, and Lauren shoots it. The family come over and introduce themselves: the man is called Travis, the woman Natividad, and their baby Dominic. Lauren reads them some Earthseed verses.

Later, the group are camping on a new beach in Santa Barbara County, and Travis and Lauren are discussing Earthseed. Travis is skeptical, but curious. Lauren explains that Earthseed's "Destiny" is to "take root among the stars"—to colonize other planets—and that this is Earthseed's version of "heaven." A week later, she writes that Travis is her first convert, and Zahra her second. She resolves to stay on lookout for new people to join the growing Earthseed community, as the more people in the group, the safer they will be.

A few days later, there is an earthquake. Lauren befriends a handsome 57-year-old black man named Bankole. The group rescue two young white women from a semi-collapsed house, and immediately after are attacked by four men. They manage to fight the men off. The white women introduce themselves as Allie and Jill Gilchrist, sisters who are on the run from an abusive father who forced them into prostitution. Harry introduces the group as Earthseed. Lauren reflects that she likes Bankole too much and must be cautious.

Days later, Bankole rescues a three-year-old child, Justin Rohr, who has just been orphaned. That night, Bankole and Lauren kiss before Lauren goes on her watch. Allie forms a bond with Justin, and Jill explains that Allie had a baby son but their father killed him.

The group stops at the San Luis Reservoir, which has not yet totally dried up. Bankole and Lauren spend time alone discussing Earthseed. Bankole explains that he is a widower and a doctor and that, like Lauren, he used to live in a gated community. They spend the next day talking, reading, writing, and having sex. Lauren spends time teaching Jill, Allie, and Zahra to read and write.

The group spend a week walking up the I-5. Bankole tells Lauren that he has property in Mendocino, a farmhouse with 300 acres of land. His sister Alexandra is currently living there with her husband, Don, and their three children. Bankole insists that Lauren joins him there, but Lauren replies that she is committed to Earthseed. Lauren then tells Bankole about her hyperempathy.

In the night, two intruders enter the group and sleep alongside them: a woman and her young daughter. The group decide to let the intruders join them, and the woman introduces herself as Emery Solis and her daughter as Tori. Emery and Tori were enslaved on a farm along with Emery's husband and two sons; however, Emery's husband grew sick and died, and shortly after her sons were kidnapped. A few days later, two more formerly enslaved people join the group: Grayson Mora and his daughter Doe. Bankole notes that there is something strange about Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe.

Days later, the group are attacked again. Lauren is shot and Jill is killed trying to save Tori. After regaining consciousness, Lauren realizes that the four new members of the group all have hyperempathy as well. She discusses the condition with Grayson, and he formally agrees to join the Earthseed community. Emery explains that the slave "bosses" like it when enslaved people have hyperempathy. The group walk through the smoke from a large fire and Lauren becomes convinced that they will die. However, they survive, and soon after reach Bankole's property. They arrive to find that the farmhouse has been burned to the ground.

The group find five skulls, although at first Bankole refuses to believe that Alexandra and her family are dead. The group argue over whether they should stay on the property or keep moving north. Eventually, the group decide to stay, and hold a mass funeral for all the loved ones they have lost. They plant acorns for each dead person and read a mix of Bible passages, Eathseed verses, poems, and songs. They decide to call their new home "Acorn." The book ends with the Parable of the

Sower from the Bible, a verse about the importance of sowing seeds on "good ground."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lauren Olamina – Lauren is the main character of the novel, which is told through her perspective in the form of her diary entries. At the beginning of the narrative she is 15, and in the final chapter she is 18. Raised in a gated community in Robledo, California, Lauren is African-American, the daughter of Reverend Olamina and an unnamed mother who died in childbirth. Lauren's mother was a drug addict, and as a result Lauren was born with a neurological condition called hyperempathy, which means she experiences the pleasure and pain of those around her. Although several people (such as Lauren's father and her brother Keith) consider hyperempathy to be shameful or a liability, it is shown to have both good and bad sides, allowing Lauren to develop a special and unusual relationship to the world around her. Indeed, as Bankole later remarks, Lauren is "a very unusual young woman." She is remarkably intelligent and well-read, with a relentless appetite for the truth in the face of widespread denial and delusion. Lauren is also exceptionally brave, which allows her to survive the extreme circumstances into which she is thrust after her neighborhood is set on fire and her family killed. Lauren is the creator of a new religion called Earthseed, which she bases on her own beliefs and observations about the world. Through talking to people she meets on the walk north through California from her neighborhood, Lauren founds the first Earthseed community, which eventually settles on the property of Lauren's lover, Bankole, in Mendocino.

Lauren's Father (Reverend Olamina) – Lauren's father is rarely referred to by name, and we never learn his first name. He is an African-American Baptist minister, college professor, and dean, who works at a college near his gated community in Robledo, California. He is a leader of the community and is ashamed of the fact that his ex-wife, Lauren's mother, was a drug addict. His second wife, Cory, is a teacher. Together, they have four sons: Keith, Marcus, Gregory, and Bennett. Reverend Olamina is a wise, kind, and fair person. He has an exceptionally close relationship with Lauren, who calls him "the best man I know." However, he also has limitations, which mainly lie in his resistance to confronting reality and wishful thinking about the world going back to the way it once was. One day, the reverend goes to work and never comes back. After a week of searching, he is presumed dead. Lauren's mourning is made worse by the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to him.

Corazon (Cory) Olamina – Cory is Lauren's stepmother. She is Mexican-American, and runs the neighborhood school. Of all her children, Keith is Cory's favorite, which Lauren finds surprising. Cory and Lauren get along well, but after Keith begins leaving the neighborhood their relationship becomes somewhat strained. Cory is kind, but more anxious and perhaps less intelligent than Lauren and her father. She likes the idea of moving to Olivar, even though Lauren's father warns her about the danger of giving up one's freedom to live in a corporate-owned city. Cory is killed along with her three youngest sons during the destruction of the neighborhood.

Taylor Franklin Bankole – Bankole is a 57-year-old African-American man who joins Lauren's group on the road north. Trained as a medical doctor, he is a widower who is on his way to Mendocino, where he owns a 300-acre farm. Bankole's sister, Alexandra, lives on the farm with her husband and children. Bankole is handsome, with a beard that reminds Lauren of Frederick Douglass. He and Lauren become lovers; although Bankole is disturbed by Lauren's young age, they get along extremely well and discuss marrying. Bankole is devastated by the discovery that his sister and her family were likely killed on the farm; however, he is consoled by the founding of the new Earthseed community on his property.

Zahra Moss – Zahra Moss was born outside the neighborhood and was homeless until Richard Moss "bought" her from her mother. Although Richard was sexist and his other wives treated Zahra cruelly, she still liked living in the Moss household simply because of the security it provided. Along with Lauren and Harry, Zahra is one of the only survivors of the neighborhood massacre. She is tough as a result of having grown up on the streets, yet also kind. She is illiterate, but is taught by Lauren how to read and write. She and Lauren develop a close friendship, and Zahra is supportive of Lauren's leadership of the group.

Keith Olamina – Keith is Lauren's brother, the eldest son of Reverend Olamina and Cory. He is 12 when the book starts and is stubborn, reckless, and often cruel. He is desperate to grow up quickly and dreams of moving to Los Angeles. After being given a BB gun for his 13th birthday, he begins to leave the neighborhood and earn money of his own accord, assumedly by dealing drugs. Before long, he is tortured and killed.

Joanne Garfield – Joanne is Lauren's best friend in the neighborhood. The two are close, but a rift forms between them when Lauren tries to tell Joanne about her fears for the future. Joanne is less courageous than Lauren and more inclined to share the adults' tendency of being in denial about the state of the world. She leaves the neighborhood to move to Olivar, the city controlled by the KSF corporation.

Travis Charles Douglas – Travis is an African-American man who Lauren meets while on the walk north. He the husband of Natividad and father of Dominic. He was taught to read by his mother, a maid who would sneak him books from her employer's library. He is a loving father and very protective of his family. He expresses interest in Earthseed, and after many

hours of debate with Lauren becomes her first "convert."

Gloria Natividad Douglas – Natividad is Travis's wife and the mother of Dominic. She worked as a maid for the same employer as Travis and his mother, until the employer began sexually harassing her and they decided to escape. She and Travis join the growing Earthseed community and eventually settle with the community at Acorn.

President Christopher Donner – Christopher Charles Morpeth Donner is a presidential candidate at the beginning of the book, and is elected while Lauren is still living in the neighborhood. Some characters hope that Donner will deliver on his promise to return the country to its former state, while many others—including Lauren and her father—remain skeptical. Lauren especially dislikes Donner's opposition to the space program, which he plans to dismantle.

Harry Balter – Harry is a white man from Lauren's neighborhood who was Joanne's boyfriend, and is one of the only people who survives the massacre. He joins Lauren and Zahra on the walk north, eventually becoming part of the first Earthseed community. Harry is sensitive and stubborn, with a strong sense of moral principles. While this is positive in some ways, it is also evidence of Harry's comparatively sheltered and privileged background. As he spends more time on the road, he comes to accept that flexibility is necessary in order to adapt to the "crazy time" in which the characters are living.

Allison (Allie) Gilchrist – Allie is a 24-year-old white woman rescued from a collapsed building by Lauren and her group. Allie and her sister, Jill, ran away from their father, who forced them into prostitution and killed Allie's baby son. Allie later develops a close bond with Justin, the three-year-old orphan who the group take in after his mother is killed. Allie is suspicious of Earthseed (and indeed of all religion), but eventually comes round to the idea of living with the newly-formed Earthseed community at Acorn.

Mrs. Sims – Mrs. Sims is an elderly white woman in Lauren's neighborhood. Deeply religious and openly racist, Mrs. Sims is rude to the non-white residents of the community. After suffering a series of traumatic events, Mrs. Sims commits suicide, which Lauren finds shocking because Mrs. Sims believed suicide was punishable by hell.

Tracy Dunn – Tracy Dunn is Amy Dunn's mother. She was raped for years by her uncle, resulting in her becoming pregnant at 12 with Amy. Tracy has difficulty expressing love for Amy, but after Amy dies Tracy is inconsolable, and eventually walks out of the neighborhood gate without returning—effectively a form of suicide.

Wardell Parrish – Wardell Parrish is a relative of Mrs. Sims who moves into her house after she dies. He is a widower. He is an unkind and suspicious person who tries to get the police to arrest Lauren's father after Keith's death. After his children are killed in a fire in the neighborhood, he lapses into insanity.

Curtis Talcott – Curtis is Lauren's boyfriend in the neighborhood. His exact age is not specified, though he seems to be roughly the same age as Lauren, and he is also African-American. He expresses hopes of marrying Lauren and going north with her; however, he is killed during the destruction of the neighborhood.

Richard Moss – Richard Moss is an African-American man who lives in Lauren's neighborhood. He practices his own, deeply sexist religion—an amalgamation of traditional West African beliefs and Old Testament teachings. He works for a water company, which provides him enough income to have three wives, including Zahra (who was homeless when he "bought" her). Lauren sees his dead body during the neighborhood massacre.

Emery Tanaka Solis – Emery is a 23-year-old woman who joins Lauren's group on the road. She is half African-American, half Japanese, and was formerly married to a Mexican man, with whom she has three children: Tori and two unnamed boys. The family lived in debt slavery, and one day Emery's sons were taken away—presumably sold into prostitution. Like Lauren, Emery and Tori have hyperempathy, and are extremely skittish based on their traumatic past. Emery becomes close to Grayson, who was also formerly enslaved.

Alexandra Casey – Alexandra is Bankole's sister. She is 40 years old and is married to Don Casey, with whom she has three children. They live on Bankole's property in Mendocino, although by the time the Earthseed group arrive there, only the charred ashes of the house remain. The group conclude that Alexandra and her family must be dead and hold a funeral for them at the end of the novel.

Alicia Leal – Alicia Catalina Godinez Leal is an astronaut who dies on a mission to Mars. Lauren learns that Leal had expressed a wish for her body to be left on Mars, but that the American Secretary of Astronautics defied this wish, bringing her body home on the grounds that it might be a "contaminant."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lauren's Mother – We learn very little about Lauren's mother other than the fact that she was a drug addict who died giving birth to Lauren.

Marcus Olamina – Marcus is Lauren's second-oldest brother. He and Lauren get on well, and Lauren describes him as very handsome. He is killed at the age of the 11 when the neighborhood is destroyed.

Bennett Olamina – Bennett is another of Lauren's younger brothers. He is killed at the age of 9 when the neighborhood is destroyed.

Gregory Olamina – Gregory is Lauren's youngest brother. He is killed at the age of 8 when the neighborhood is destroyed.

Amy Dunn – Amy Dunn is a three-year-old girl living in

Lauren's neighborhood. Her mother, Tracy, was only 13 when Amy was born, and Lauren writes that Amy was unloved. Amy is killed by accident when someone from outside shoots through the neighborhood gate.

Rosalee Payne – Rosalee Payne is Wardell's sister. She is a widow who moves into Mrs. Sims' house. She is killed along with her children when the house is set on fire.

Peter Moss – Peter Moss is one of Richard Moss's sons. Lauren dislikes him because he tries to be like his father.

Michael Talcott – Michael is Curtis's brother. Lauren finds him lying dead after the neighborhood massacre.

Bianca Montoya – Bianca is a 17-year-old Latina girl in Lauren's neighborhood who gets pregnant and decides to marry her boyfriend. Lauren cannot decide whether this decision is "stupid" or "brave"; in any case, Bianca represents a foil (contrast) to Lauren's decision to not get married or have children.

Dominic "Domingo" Douglas – Dominic is a baby, the son of Travis and Natividad.

Jillian (Jill) Gilchrist – Jill is Allie's 25-year-old sister. Like Allie, she was forced into prostitution by their father before running away, and joins Lauren's group after being rescued from the collapsed building. Jill is shot by an unknown attacker while carrying Tori to safety.

Justin Rohr – Justin is a three-year-old white boy who Bankole finds when Justin's mother is killed in an attack. He was born in Riverside, California, and is adopted into the Earthseed community after Bankole discovers him.

Don Casey – Don is Alexandra's husband, and Bankole's brother-in-law.

Tori Solis – Tori is Emery's 9-year-old daughter. Like her mother, she also has hyperempathy.

Grayson Mora – Grayson is an Afro-Latino man who joins Lauren's group after Emery's daughter Tori befriends his daughter, Doe. Grayson and Doe were both formerly enslaved and both have hyperempathy. They settle on Acorn with the rest of the group.

Doe Mora – Doe is Grayson's daughter. She is 8 years old.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RELIGION, HOPE, AND CHANGE

The book's heroine, Lauren Olamina, is the daughter of a Baptist minister who founds her own religion, Earthseed, in the midst of the apocalyptic disintegration of the United States. The novel begins with Lauren's conflicted feelings about Christianity on the eve of her baptism, and ends with a mass funeral service in which pieces of Christian and Earthseed scripture are read side by side. One of the most important aspects of the narrative arc of the novel is thus Lauren's journey to take Earthseed seriously and reconcile her commitment to Earthseed with the experience of being raised in a Baptist family. In the latter half of the novel, Earthseed begins to attract converts, and in doing so grows organically from a set of ideas and observations within Lauren's mind into a real religious community. Throughout this process, Earthseed is also contrasted with Christianity, and the most important aspect of this contrast emerges from the way in which each religion addresses hope and change.

Whereas Christianity is depicted as providing a (false) sense of hope against a brutal and chaotic reality, Earthseed's central principle is simply that "God is change." Followers of Earthseed must accept that change is inevitable, that it is often destructive, and that they have the power to "shape God." As a result, Earthseed provides a more real, tangible sense of hope than Christianity. Rather than praying to God for mercy and justice, followers of Earthseed work to change the world themselves. Shortly after befriending Travis on the walk north, Lauren explains the principles of Earthseed to him, at which point Travis objects: "Your God doesn't care about you at all," to which Lauren replies: "All the more reason to care about myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together." Within Earthseed, the source of hope does not come from God directly, but rather from people, and specifically people who accept the inevitability of change and choose to pursue a constructive, compassionate way of life.

The novel points out that one of the main reasons why people are attracted to Christianity and other mainstream religions is because they provide hope in the form of the afterlife. There is little hope left within the daily reality of the characters in the novel, and thus many characters focus on the afterlife as the only possible source of redemption from the horror of their mortal existence. However, belief in heaven is—like belief in divine intervention—shown to often be an insufficient source of hope in the face of earthly brutality. This is tragically illustrated in the case of Mrs. Sims, a devoutly Christian member of Lauren's neighborhood who kills herself despite believing that people who commit suicide will go to hell. Lauren notes: "She believed in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible. Yet, when things got to be too much for her, she decided to trade pain for eternal pain in the hereafter." This observation emphasizes that even the most deeply-held religious belief (and

hope) is often not enough to console people against the suffering that exists in the world.

When it comes to the matter of heaven, Earthseed is once again shown to offer a more real and substantial form of hope in comparison to other religions. While some characters (such as Travis and Bankole) object that Earthseed will not be able to gain followers because it does not provide the promise of heaven, Lauren disputes this. Belief in heaven is a central part of Earthseed's ideology, but—in Lauren's words—"My heaven really exists. And you don't have to die to reach it." Earthseed posits that "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." Lauren explains that humanity's only hope of survival is to colonize space, and that this will be the equivalent of going to heaven for Earthseed followers. When Bankole asks Lauren what Earthseed offers, she replies: "A unifying, purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children." Note that in Lauren's use of words, Earthseed does not offer the *guarantee* of heaven but rather the "hope" of it. At the same time, this hope is more tangible than the hope of a Christian afterlife, and is more closely tied to the hope of a better life within the post-apocalyptic earthly world.

INCLUSION VS. EXCLUSION

The first half of the book takes place within Lauren's gated community, and this immediately brings to light the importance of exclusion. As the United States becomes increasingly brutal and apocalyptic, people are more and more desperate to close themselves off from the violence and destruction taking over the country. Whereas the very rich are able to live safely within highly-securitized communities and can flee dangerous areas via helicopter, middle-class people like Lauren and her family attempt to secure themselves within gated communities. However, it is made clear throughout the book that these attempts are inevitably futile. Part of the reason for this futility is practical; people like Lauren's family simply do not have the resources to effectively secure and defend themselves from the violence that exists beyond the neighborhood gate.

The other reason why attempts to find safety through exclusion are doomed to failure is because, as Lauren points out in her diary, excluding people from a community breeds violent resentment among the excluded. Simply the fact that Lauren's neighborhood exists puts the neighborhood in danger. Although the reality is that almost everyone in the gated community is poor and unemployed, the fact that the community is sequestered off from the outside world creates the impression that the people living within it have wealth or resources that they want to safeguard. The violent destruction of Lauren's neighborhood—and the massacre of its residents—is thus presented as an inevitable (if deeply tragic) event.

The book's account of how the United States descended into an apocalyptic state also emphasizes the connection between exclusion and destruction. Lauren indicates that the history of racial and socioeconomic inequality in the US led directly to the dystopia of the 2020s, suggesting that excluding groups of people based on their race, gender, and class from mainstream society creates a climate of violence and destruction.

Despite the problems associated with exclusion, however, the book also suggests that exclusion is often necessary—both as an essential (if unreliable) way of staying safe, and as a way of building community. Exclusion and inclusion—rather than cancelling one another out—work together in order to form social units such as Lauren's family, her neighborhood, and the Earthseed community. Throughout the narrative, Lauren describes the difficulty of navigating the line between exclusion and inclusion in order to form bonds and stay safe. In the neighborhood in which Lauren lives at the beginning of the novel, the residents support one another and share resources, thus helping each other to survive through a structure of mutual dependence.

However, this policy of inclusion and support is flawed by the fact that not everyone in the neighborhood is trustworthy. Lauren admits: "There are other people in the neighborhood whom I don't like. But I don't trust the Payne-Parrishes. The kids seem all right, but the adults. . . . I wouldn't want to have to depend on them. Not even for little things." Even within the hyper-inclusive environment of her gated community, Lauren maintains a carefully exclusionary attitude in order to keep herself (and the people she *does* trust) safe. She carries this same attitude forward after the neighborhood is destroyed, using it to decide who to trust on the walk north and who to include in the growing Earthseed community.

Themes of inclusion and exclusion are also explored through Lauren's hyperempathy, a condition that means she feels other people's pleasure and pain. As a result, Lauren does not have the same psychological and bodily boundaries that naturally separate people from one another. This forces her to be especially vigilant about who she excludes and includes—both in the sense of building the Earthseed community and in her personal proximity to other people. However, as much as having hyperempathy can be dangerous for Lauren, it is also part of what makes her such a strong and exceptional person. She is (literally) personally implicated in other people's wellbeing, and is automatically disinclined from violence. For this reason, early in the novel Lauren mentions that she wishes she could live in a community among other people with hyperempathy. This dream in part becomes a reality when the formerly enslaved Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe join the Earthseed community, as all four of these characters also have hyperempathy.

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND REBIRTH

The book is set in a climate of extreme destruction. Struck by environmental and political disaster, the United States has descended into an apocalyptic landscape, which—despite the promises of President Donner—seems largely unsalvageable. This absolute sense of destruction is encapsulated by the fires that rage across the country, which are propelled in part by a new drug most commonly known as "pyro." The drug leads people to arson and causes them to experience a powerful sense of desire and satisfaction when watching fire burn. Several characters in the novel compare this desire to sexual lust, suggesting that in the doom-laden world of 2020s America people have come to have a visceral appetite for destruction.

At the same time, one of the most important thematic elements of the book is the idea that the seemingly unstoppable destruction is not necessarily absolute or permanent. While one world is certainly ending before the characters' eyes, others are being created. There are many examples of different ways in which the characters cling to a sense of hope for creation in the midst of destruction. For example, Lauren notes that in her neighborhood there is a strong pressure for young people to marry and have children. Although Lauren herself deliberately avoids this fate, choosing not to marry Curtis and using contraception when she has sex with both him and Bankole, there are other reminders of the ongoing creation of new life, such as the children Lauren helps to teach in her neighborhood or Travis and Natividad's baby, Dominic. While dystopian science fiction often depicts an end to human reproduction (either by necessity or choice), babies and children remain a central part of the world of the novel.

Where destruction is symbolized by fire, the creation of new life is symbolized by acorns. There are several scenes in which Lauren eats acorn bread, a type of food which her father notes was previously only consumed by Native Americans. Similarly, when the Earthseed community hosts the mass funeral at the end of the book, Lauren comes up with the idea that each person should plant an acorn, which will grow into "live oak trees [dedicated] to our dead." Indeed, planting an acorn—a symbol of new life—in honor of the dead highlights the significance of rebirth. Of course, the notion of planting the seed of new life is also at play in the book's title and the name "Earthseed." The Biblical Parable of the Sower—which is quoted at the end of the novel—emphasizes the importance of planting seeds in "good ground," as this is the only way to ensure that new life will spring forth from them.

The Parable of the Sower is thus directly related to Lauren's plan of founding "Earthseed Communities" that will eventually grow into a new population of people who "take root among the stars." Although it may appear that there is very little "good ground" left in which to plant the seeds of a new community, on a metaphorical level the group of people who become the first Earthseed congregation are the equivalent of this fertile earth. On the walk north, Lauren carefully chooses people she can trust and who appreciate Earthseed's message. It is also significant that when the community decide to stop walking and settle, it is to begin a farm—another connection to the practice of sowing seeds, and thus to the themes of creation and rebirth amidst destruction.

TRUTH VS. DENIAL

Throughout the novel Lauren presents herself as someone who seeks truth while those around her remain in a state of denial. Indeed, this is part of what marks her out as different from those around her, allowing her to survive the horror of her conditions and work to build a better future.

Ideas about truth and denial are introduced right at the beginning of the book, when Lauren is preparing to be baptized. Lauren is reluctant for the baptism to take place for multiple reasons, all of which stem from commitment to (what she believes to be) the truth. She admits that she no longer believes in the Christian God, saying: "My God has another name." She is also reluctant to attend her father's friend's church for the baptism, pointing out that it would be safer to simply be baptized in her own bathtub. However, she notes that journeying to the church—which is the only actual church building left in the area—reminds the adults of "the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things." She adds that "they never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back." Clearly, the adults are in a state of denial about the world in which they live and the possibility of this world returning to its former state. As a young person who never properly experienced "the good old days" for herself, Lauren is not susceptible to this kind of nostalgia; furthermore, she is less wedded to existing religious tradition, and as a result has come up with her own ideas about God, which differ significantly from the Christian view. In this sense, Lauren's youth enables her to access the truth in a way that older people cannot—a reversal of the conventional idea that wisdom comes with age.

On the other hand, the book also features young people who are in a similar state of denial to the adults around them, thus indicating that youth does not inherently encourage people to see the truth. This idea is most clearly conveyed during Lauren's conversation with her friend Joanne. The two girls are the same age, and share suspicions about certain elements of the adults' tendency for denial, such as the notion that President Donner will make the country go back to "normal." However, when Lauren argues that they should act on their understanding of the truth and make preparations to leave the

gated community, Joanne is resistant and rejects their discussion entirely, asking Lauren: "Why do you want to talk about this stuff?"

For the novel's adults and teenagers alike, the truth of their reality is so painful and frightening that they cannot help but embrace denial. After Joanne tells her mother about her conversation with Lauren, Lauren's father scolds his daughter, saying: "These things frighten people. It's best not to talk about them." When Joanne eventually decides to move with her family to the corporate-owned city of Olivar, Lauren accuses her of giving into her denial by saying: "I see what's out there. You see it too. You just deny it." Unlike Joanne, Lauren's decisions about her future are grounded in a firm rejection of fantasy and an embrace of truth, no matter how frightening this truth might be.

The question of truth and denial is also important in relation to Lauren's observations about God and her development of Earthseed. When characters such as Travis suggest that Earthseed is simply something Lauren has invented, she compares the process of conceptualizing Earthseed to a scientific discovery: "I reached down, picked up a small stone, and put it on the table between us. 'If I could analyze this and tell you all that it was made of, would that mean I'd made up its contents?'" Throughout the book, Lauren asserts that Earthseed consists of true observations about the world; indeed, this is what makes it different from other religions.

Under one of the passages of Earthseed scripture Lauren quotes in her diary, she writes: "This is the literal truth." Her use of the word "literal" draws an important contrast between Earthseed scripture and other religious texts such as the Bible. There is much within the Bible that is difficult to accept as the literal truth, due to the fact that it contradicts other parts of the Bible, common sense, and scientific observations about the world. Interpreting the Bible as literally true thus requires a denial of scientific facts, and as a result, Lauren is disdainful of people (such as Mrs. Sims) who subscribe to Biblical literalism. Earthseed scripture, on the other hand, emerges from observations about the world, and as such there is no contradiction. For this reason, Lauren is able to assert that Earthseed is "literally true" even though it is the product of her own mind; indeed, she presents Earthseed as not only true but a powerful barrier against the forces of fear, fantasy, and denial.

WRITING, BOOKS, AND SCRIPTURE

The novel consists of a series of diary entries by Lauren, and thus the entire narrative is mediated by the act of writing. Although her diary entries are highly detailed and seemingly comprehensive, Lauren draws attention to the gaps and biases within them. For example, the entry for Wednesday 26th August 2026 is only one line long: "Today, my parents had to go downtown to identify the body of my brother Keith," and in the next entry four days later Lauren admits: "I haven't been able to write a word since Wednesday." Sentences like these remind the reader that although Lauren makes an effort to accurately capture the world around her, her writing will never provide a truly objective picture.

One of the most important thematic questions in the narrative concerns the extent of the power of writing, books, and scripture, particularly in the context of a chaotic, brutal environment. What is the place of the written word in a world where most people must focus all their energy on surviving each day? Can writing and literature have any impact on such a world? For Lauren, the act of writing helps her to make sense of the world around her. After Keith dies, she writes: "I don't want to write about this. But I need to. Sometimes writing about a thing makes it easier to understand."

Reading literature also helps Lauren and other characters navigate their way through the horrifying and often bizarre reality in which they live. Lauren notes that her grandmother left a bookcase of science fiction novels when she died, explaining that these novels help her to understand certain aspects of 2020s America, such as the "company-city." Of course, this passage contains a clever twist, as *The Parable of the Sower* is itself a science fiction novel which in reality was written during the time Lauren's grandmother is supposed to have lived. Through meta-fictional gestures and references to real works of literature, Butler blurs the line between fiction and reality. The world in which Lauren lives was considered to be the stuff of fantasy by the generations preceding her, and this acts as a warning that the real world could in turn come to resemble the dystopia depicted in the novel.

Scripture also plays an important role in the novel, and is particularly relevant to the question of the power of the written word. Although Lauren has renounced Christian belief, Biblical passages feature prominently in her thoughts, conversations, and diary entries. The most obvious example of this is Jesus' Parable of the Sower, which appears in both the title of the novel and on the last page. There are many other Biblical references scattered throughout the narrative, suggesting that even as Christianity becomes less and less relevant to the characters' lives, the Bible continues to play an important role in how they understand themselves and the world around them. In this sense, the Bible appears as a cultural object as much as a religious one, and Biblical references help illustrate the way the dystopia of 2020s America came to exist.

Even more important than Biblical passages, however, are the Earthseed scriptures which Lauren composes herself and eventually decides to call *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. The fact that Lauren scatters passages from the Book of the Living throughout her diary entries gives this book a sense of authority, despite the fact that Lauren wrote it herself. Just as people quote Biblical passages in other pieces of writing, so does Lauren quote her own words as a kind of counterpoint to her diary entries.

At the same time, Earthseed scripture also differs significantly from the Bible and sacred texts of other religions. Whereas sacred texts tend to prominently feature stories, Earthseed scripture has no narrative elements. It is written in the style of poetry and is straightforward in both its informational and instructive aspects. Another distinction between the Book of the Living and mainstream religious texts is that Earthseed scripture is notably abstract. While this at times makes it seem vague and confusing, it also means that Earthseed scripture can be considered "literally true" in a way that is not possible for other religious texts. In this sense, the novel suggests that there is a kind of higher truth to poetry and literature that is not the case for other forms of communication. Writing, books, and scripture help people to access the truth not through their comprehensiveness or detail, but rather through an abstract and poetic form of honesty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ACORNS

Acorns feature throughout the book as a symbol of new life, hope, and possibility. When Lauren is living with her family in the neighborhood, they regularly eat acorn bread. It is only later that Lauren's father explains that they make and consume acorn bread because he read in a book that Native Americans used acorns in this manner. This demonstrates Lauren's father's belief in innovatively creating (or recreating) new ways of living, a principle he passed onto his daughter. Acorns are also important at the very end of the novel, when the group of people who settle on Bankole's property decide to ritualistically plant oak trees using acorns as part of their mass funeral. Again, this emphasizes the extent to which acorns symbolize the rebirth that is inherent within the natural world. Acorns fall from grown trees and are planted in soil, feeding on the nutrients provided by dead plants in order to grow into new trees. Fittingly, the new community decide to call their home "Acorn" as a tribute to this sense of new life in the midst of death and destruction. This also links the community's home base to the religious principles around which they have congregated: Earthseed. Acorns are, after all, a type of seed, and the Biblical Parable of the Sower after which the book is named—and which is included in full at the very end of the narrative—focuses on the importance of planting seeds in "good ground" in order for those seeds to grow and flourish. Despite the apocalyptic landscape in which the characters live, they can plant acorns both metaphorically and literally in the "good ground" of their community and thereby find hope in a new, better way of life.

FIRE

Fire is the most prominent force of destruction in the novel. All over the country, communities are destroyed by fires—including, eventually, Lauren's neighborhood. Part of the significance of fire is that it can be both a natural and man-made force. Many of the fires raging across the country occur naturally, as a result of climate changed-induced drought, storms, and extreme heat waves. However, others are started on purpose by arsonists, including addicts of the drug known as pyro. This drug, which is mentioned frequently throughout the book, makes the experience of watching a fire burn "better than sex" and thus encourages addicts to burn everything in sight. The comparison between arson—an act of destruction—and sex, which (at least in a biological sense) is an act of creation, is testament to the perversion of humanity in the world of the novel.

The destruction caused by fire is generally shown to be total and irrevocable—as soon as Lauren's neighborhood burns down, for example, she, Harry, and Zahra flee, knowing that the community in which they once lived will never exist again. On the other hand, there are also references to the idea of the "phoenix": new life rising from the ashes of fire. This is especially true on Acorn, the Earthseed community formed on the remains of Bankole's farmland at the end of the novel. Although Bankole's farmhouse and family have been destroyed by fire, the community plant seeds in the land that remains, a reminder that even ash can provide the "good ground" evoked in the Parable of the Sower.

HEAVEN

Religion plays a very prominent role in the novel, and so do ideas about heaven. This is particularly true because there is so much death in the narrative, and because the world of the novel is so miserable. An important question the novel asks is whether or not the characters—who suffer so much in the mortal world—have any hope of finding relief and joy in the afterlife. Raised as a Baptist, Lauren is taught to believe in the traditional Christian version of heaven. Theoretically, the promise of the Christian heaven gives believers hope and motivation to adhere to moral principles during their time on earth. However, it is clear that in the apocalyptic climate of the novel, the abstract promise of a Christian heaven is not enough in the face of the immense suffering and destruction that occurs in the mortal world. This is evidenced when the deeply religious Mrs. Sims chooses to commit suicide even though she believes that this will mean she is sent to hell. It is also revealed when Lauren hopes that her brother Keith will "rest in peace—in his ashes, in his urn, wherever." Lauren's ambivalence about the afterlife shapes the development of the Earthseed concept of heaven. Within Earthseed, heaven is literalized in time and space—Lauren

writes that it is Earthseed's "destiny" to "take root among the stars." Lauren hopes that Earthseed communities will eventually be able to exist in the literal heavens—outer space. She argues that the promise of this real, physical heaven is better than the abstract promise of a Christian heaven, which does not arrive until after death and which no human can be sure even exists.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grand Central Publishing edition of *The Parable of the Sower* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

These verses, taken from *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*, appear above the first chapter of the novel. Although it is not yet clear to the reader what Earthseed is, the verses are written in a style that is simple, unambiguous, and easy to understand. This is a distinct contrast to many other forms of religious scripture, which often employs technical vocabulary, poetic language, and complex symbolic references. As Bankole later points out, Earthseed is remarkably devoid of mysticism, and this is evident in the very first lines of Earthseed scripture quoted at the beginning of the novel.

These lines contain the most important principles of Earthseed. On one level, they are radical and filled with meaning; in another sense, they are rather neutral. It is, after all, not particularly controversial to state that "the only lasting truth is Change." Regardless of one's scientific or religious understanding of the world, the cycle of creation and destruction proves the cliché that the only guarantee in life is change. On the other hand, the statement "God Is Change" is perhaps deceptively simple. Lauren's understanding of God is in fact a rather radical rejection of the God evoked by existing religions.

To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things. They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back.
Yeah.
To us kids––most of us––the trip was just an adventure, an excuse to go outside the wall. We would be baptized out of duty or as a kind of insurance, but most of us aren't that much concerned with religion. I am, but then I have a different religion.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren is traveling to her father's friend's church in order to be baptized. The church is beyond her neighborhood wall, and is the only church she knows of that still has a physical building. This quotation is filled with oppositions: between adults and kids, past and present, faith and lack of faith, and the neighborhood and the world outside. These oppositions stand in tension with one another; the adults' view of the world is drastically different from that of the kids, and people long for the past in a present that is violently different.

This passage also introduces the theme of truth versus denial. Lauren notes that the adults choose to place false hope in religion and in the idea of the world returning back to the way it once was. The kids, however, are thoroughly focused on the reality around them. They have little interest in religion, do not believe that the world will go back to its former state, and are mostly just excited by the "adventure" of going out beyond the neighborhood wall. They live in the present even though the present has little to offer them.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind, but with all of us armed and watchful, people stared, but they let us alone. Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren has gone out with a group of adults and kids from her neighborhood to practice shooting. She has explained that the group generally gets along, but adds that issues can arise from the fact that some of them are white and others are black. Clearly, the United States of the 2020s suffers from the same issues that afflict the country in the present, even if these issues are compounded by the apocalyptic nature of the 2020s American landscape. In fact, the country seems to be regressing when it comes to the problem of racial prejudice. Whereas toward the end of the 20th century expressing prejudiced ideas at least carried some stigma, in Butler's vision of the 21st century, racism is again becoming accepted as normal.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ "You don't know that! You can't read the future. No one can."
"You can," I said, "if you want to. It's scary but once you get past the fear, it's easy."

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina , Joanne Garfield (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Joanne and Lauren are eating lunch together and have been discussing recent waves of disease, drug epidemics, and natural disasters that are devastating the country. Lauren has pointed out that at some point someone is inevitably going to break down the walls of the neighborhood; however, Joanne refuses to believe this. Clearly, the conflict between Lauren and Joanne epitomizes the theme of truth versus denial. Lauren acknowledges the fact that the neighborhood is insecure and the world outside violent, and that an impending disaster is therefore likely; Joanne chooses to ignore this fact.

However, this passage also touches on other issues related to Lauren's understanding of the world and Earthseed in particular. In a certain sense, Lauren can be seen as a prophet: someone with a unique insight into God and who sparks a new religious faith. However, unlike traditional prophets, Lauren does not have extraordinary abilities and has not received a message directly from God. Rather, she develops her ideas about God simply through observation of the world around her. Lauren is not a supernatural figure, and cannot "read the future" any more than she can communicate directly with God. Her ability to predict future events is simply rooted in her willingness to embrace the truth, rather than live in a state of denial.

❝ Well, today, I found the name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants. They have no ability at all to travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don't have to just sit in one place and wait to be wiped out. There are islands thousands of miles from anywhere––the Hawaiian Islands, for example, and Easter Island––where plants seeded themselves and grew long before any humans arrived.
Earthseed.
I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77-78

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren has written that naming something "helps one to begin to understand it." She has just invented the name for her ideas about religion: Earthseed. In this passage, she explains that she thought up the name while gardening. The process of coming up with the name "Earthseed" mirrors the process that Lauren uses to develop all her ideas. She takes inspiration from the natural world (in this case, gardening), her education and reading (as evidenced by her knowledge of the Hawaiian Islands and Easter Island), and

from her own reasoning about what will happen in the future (her prediction that Earthseed will have to leave Earth).

This passage also emphasizes the importance of seeds in relation to the theme of creation, destruction, and rebirth. In the midst of immense destruction—in a "dying place"––Lauren is creating something new. Although there may be no hope left for life on Earth, that does not mean that this dying planet cannot bring forth new life and possibilities. Just as the soil in which seeds grow is made up of dead plants and animals, so is Earthseed a kind of (re)birth made possible through death and destruction.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ May he rest in peace––in his urn, in heaven, wherever.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker), Keith Olamina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren's brother Keith has been viciously tortured and killed. At the funeral, Lauren has noticed that her father isn't crying, and Lauren's boyfriend Curtis points out that Lauren hasn't cried either. Lauren admits that she has mixed feelings about Keith and doesn't feel bad about the fact that she has not cried for him. However, in this quotation she expresses hope that he rests in peace. Note that while Lauren usually writes in a confident and decisive manner—particularly when it comes to the topic of religion—in this quotation she speaks about death and the afterlife in an ambiguous way. Is she simply feeling depressed and defeated after the death of Keith? Or does she truly feel ambivalent about the matter of heaven?

Both of these explanations are valid, but as becomes clear later in the book, life after death is not an important part of Earthseed. Lauren does emphasize the importance of heaven within Earthseed teachings; however, she also points out that this version of heaven is a mortal experience, and "you don't have to die to reach it." While Lauren is unequivocally clear about God and "heaven," she does not place particular importance on life after death, preferring to focus on the more immediate, tangible, and knowable elements of life in the mortal world.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ There was another robbery last night––or an attempted robbery. I wish that was all. No garden theft this time. Three guys came over the wall and crowbarred their way into the Cruz house. The Cruz family, of course, has loud burglar alarms, barred windows, and security gates at all the doors just like the rest of us, but that doesn't seem to matter. When people want to come in, they come in.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 11, Lauren writes that the neighborhood community is "coming apart"––that they are like a rope breaking one strand at a time. In this passage, she explains that there was another robbery, and that no matter how much the neighborhood residents try to secure themselves against the world outside, there is ultimately nothing they can do to stop people coming in. This passage thus mirrors Lauren's earlier conversation with Joanne in which she stressed the inevitability of intruders entering the neighborhood and eventually destroying it. Again, Lauren is certain that this will happen—not because she can truly predict the future, but rather because she knows that exclusion breeds violence and that securing oneself against the outside world is inherently unsustainable.

❝ Maybe Olivar is the future––one face of it. Cities controlled by big companies are old hat in science fiction. My grandmother left a whole bookcase of old science fiction novels. The company-city subgenre always seemed to star a hero who outsmarted, overthrew, or escaped "the company." I've never seen one where the hero fought like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company. In real life, that's the way it will be. That's the way it is.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

A corporation called KSF has taken over the coastal city of Olivar, and offered jobs in exchange for room and board. There has been an argument in Lauren's family about whether moving to Olivar would be a good idea, and Lauren has just learned that there are other families in the neighborhood who want to move, too. Lauren is opposed to the idea of moving to Olivar in part because she has read her grandmother's old science fiction novels about company-cities. This is a meta-fictional moment in the novel wherein Butler gestures toward the fact that *The Parable of the Sower* is itself a science fiction novel (and one that would be considered "old" in the time at which Lauren is writing).

This passage also contains a subtle critique of the depiction of company cities within the science fiction genre. As Lauren points out, stories of company cities often focus on a hero who manages to overcome the system and escape. However, this narrative ignores both the reality of what it is like to live under the control of a corporation and the suffering of all those left behind within the corporation's grip. Unlike other science fiction novels, *The Parable of the Sower* is focused on depicting social problems and the plight of the masses, rather than the story of a single hero. Although Lauren is in many ways a heroic character, her journey is rooted in family and community, rather than her individual prowess.

I'm trying to speak--to write--the truth. I'm trying to be clear. I'm not interested in being fancy, or even original. Clarity and truth will be plenty, if I can only achieve them. If it happens that there are other people outside somewhere preaching my truth, I'll join them. Otherwise, I'll adapt where I must, take what opportunities I can find or make, hang on, gather students, and teach.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren has been thinking about her future, and has decided that as soon as she turns 18 she will leave the neighborhood, go north, and try to survive by teaching literacy. She has also decided on a name for her Earthseed scripture: *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. In this passage, she explains that she is not trying to make the scripture "fancy" or "original," just clear and true. This distinguishes Lauren's Earthseed writings from many other forms of religious scripture, which are often rather complex, poetic, mystical, or self-contradictory. As Lauren's plans for the future of Earthseed make clear, she wants her scripture to be clear in order to help her gain students and converts. In this sense, Earthseed is a highly inclusive religion, designed to be as accessible as possible.

Chapter 14 Quotes

In order to rise
From its own ashes
A phoenix
First
Must
Burn.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

This is the quote that precedes Chapter 14, which is set in the year 2027, after a 7-month gap from the previous chapter. At the end of the last chapter, Lauren's father was missing and presumed dead, the neighborhood was being struck by repeated arson attacks and robberies, and Lauren was secretly harboring a plan to leave and go north as soon as she turned 18. This passage from Earthseed emphasizes the idea that destruction is sometimes necessary for creation and rebirth. The phoenix—a mythical bird that would burst into flame and be reborn from the ashes—also plays an important role here due to the fact that fire is the most important symbol of destruction in the novel. Lauren's mention of the phoenix points to the idea that although fire can seem like a force of total and irrevocable destruction, new life can also be born in its wake.

I have to write. There's nothing familiar left to me but the writing. God is Change. I hate God. I have to write.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren awakes in the middle of the night to the smell of burning; she grabs essential supplies and flees the neighborhood as it is being destroyed around her, unable to stop and find out what's happening to Cory and her brothers. She then spends the night in an abandoned garage beyond the neighborhood gate. This passage is the beginning of the next diary entry, in which she writes about what happens when she returns to the neighborhood after the night of fire.

Although it is not yet clear what happened, Lauren is obviously in a state of shock. Everything that was familiar to her is gone; the only thing she has left is her own mind and her ability to express her thoughts through writing. Yet even in this traumatized mindset, Lauren does not sink into a state of denial. She maintains that "God is Change," although she adds that she also "hates" God. This passage thus emphasizes the importance of sticking to one's beliefs even in the face of unimaginable horror. It is Lauren's thoughts and writing that will get her through the devastation she has experienced.

❝ Some kind of insane burn-the-rich movement, Keith had said. We've never been rich, but to the desperate, we looked rich. We were surviving and we had our wall. Did our community die so that addicts could make a help-the-poor political statement?

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker), Keith Olamina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Overnight, the neighborhood has been burned to the ground, the residents massacred, and their belongings seized by scavengers. Lauren managed to escape, and has returned to inspect the damage and gather whatever belongings she can. In this passage, she reflects on what happened to the neighborhood and why, remembering Keith telling her that poor drug addicts would ravage anyone who they perceived to have even a small degree of wealth and security. Although Lauren is not opposed to helping the poor, she knows that her community were not exactly rich oppressors. Furthermore, there is no possible moral justification for the massacre that took place. On the other hand, her thoughts again reemphasize the fact that exclusion inherently breeds resentment, and shutting oneself off from the wider world is not a sustainable mode of existence.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ "We're a pack, the three of us, and all those other people out there aren't in it. If we're a good pack, and we work together, we have a chance. You can be sure we aren't the only pack out here."

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker), Zahra Moss, Harry Balter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren, Harry, and Zahra are walking north along the freeway. Zahra has been instructing Lauren and Harry to remain vigilant at all times, reminding them that anyone could be dangerous, no matter how vulnerable or innocent they look. In this passage, Lauren stresses the importance that the three of them work together and remain suspicious of everyone on the outside, as this is the only way they will survive. The passage thus illustrates the way in which inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive, but often function together. The inclusion, trust, and support within Lauren's group with Harry and Zahra keeps them safe from the people who they exclude. This passage also emphasizes the reality that in order to survive beyond the neighborhood gate, one must maintain strict boundaries to one's sympathy.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ "I wasn't crying about that fire. I was crying about our fire and my Bibi and

thinking about how much I hate people who set fires like that. I wish they would burn. I wish I could burn them. I wish I could just take them and throw them in the fire… like they did my Bibi."

Related Characters: Zahra Moss (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Lauren, Harry, and Zahra have passed an enormous fire on their walk, and seeing it has made Zahra cry. That evening, she explains that she cried because the fire reminded her of the neighborhood and her daughter. Zahra's words convey the way in which violence often creates an unstoppable cycle of hatred and destruction. Zahra is not an inherently cruel person, but the trauma of seeing her child murdered instills in her a reckless appetite for revenge. Indeed, this notion of a cycle of violence reminds us that the pyro addicts who destroyed the neighborhood have almost certainly witnessed unimaginable horror themselves, including the loss of family members. When people have lost all hope in the possibility of a better future, they end up turning toward pointless destruction.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"Change does scare most people."
"I know. God is frightening. Best to learn to cope."
"Your stuff isn't very comforting."
"It is after a while. I'm still growing into it myself. God isn't good or evil, doesn't favor you or hate you, and yet God is better partnered than fought."
"Your God doesn't care about you at all," Travis said.
"All the more reason to care about myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together. 'God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.' We decide which aspect we embrace—and how to deal with the others."

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina , Travis Charles Douglas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

After Travis and Natividad join Lauren, Harry, and Zahra on the walk north, Lauren begins discussing Earthseed with Travis. The two debate the usefulness of thinking about God as "change," and Travis has pointed out that Lauren's ideas about God are not very comforting. As always, Lauren favors truth over comfort. However, in this passage she also explains that there are ways in which Earthseed is even *more* comforting than traditional religions. This is partly because—according to Lauren—it is based in truth rather than delusion, but also because it offers followers a chance to shape their own destinies. Followers of Earthseed do not rely on the mercy of God in order to ease their suffering; instead, they take matters into their own hands and rely on themselves and each other.

Lauren argues that communities on Earth are a better way of ensuring that people are taken care of than prayer and worship of God. Although on one level this is markedly different from mainstream religion, on another it actually coheres with the way in which followers of mainstream religion find comfort within their mortal existence. In Christianity, for example, the church community often becomes a source of education, socialization, charity, and care. In this sense, existing religious communities are not always so different from the communities Lauren imagines.

"Now is a time for building foundations––Earthseed communities––focused on the Destiny. After all, my heaven really exists, and you don't have to die to reach it. 'The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars,' or among the ashes." I nodded toward the burned area.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

During their discussions about Earthseed, Travis has objected that Lauren's version of God does not give people the hope of heaven. In response, Lauren decides to tell Travis about Earthseed's "Destiny." This passage clarifies what exactly Lauren means by "heaven" and why she believes her own ideas about heaven are preferable to that of existing religions. Believers in a conventional afterlife may point out that Lauren's version of heaven does not offer the immortality and eternal peace promised by religions such as Christianity and Islam. However, Lauren's words indicate that her understanding of heaven has advantages over the traditional version (particularly if, like Lauren, one is dubious that the heaven of Christianity

actually exists). No one can be certain if there is an afterlife until death; yet the heaven of Earthseed "really exists" both in the sense that outer space certainly exists, and that Earthseed's "heaven" will be brought into existence by Earthseed communities themselves.

Lauren's version of heaven is also more congruent with the natural, mortal world than the heaven of other religions. Lauren emphasizes this by pointing out that Earthseed will take root "among the stars, or among the ashes." Just as new life naturally springs up in the remains of dead and decaying organisms, so may Earthseed's heaven be born out of the destruction that preceded it.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ God is neither good
nor evil,
neither loving
nor hating.
God is Power.
God is Change.
We must find the rest of what we need
within ourselves,
in one another,
in our Destiny.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

This is the Earthseed scripture that precedes Chapter 20. The group members have just agreed to do target practice together using the antique rifle that Bankole has purchased. In this passage, Lauren reiterates the point that "God is Change," while adding further details to her ideas about God. These ideas appear to be a direct refutation of certain existing religious beliefs about God, such as the idea that God is all-loving. Lauren also connects her description of God directly to the Earthseed imperative to form communities and strive for the "Destiny" of taking root in outer space. Because God acts in a morally neutral manner, followers of Earthseed must develop communities based on moral principles of love and truth. Furthermore, because God is powerful, it is only by working together in communities that humans have any hope of shaping God.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ So today we remembered the friends and the family members we've lost. We spoke our individual memories and quoted Bible passages, Earthseed verses, and bits of songs and poems that were favorites of the living or the dead.
Then we buried our dead and we planted oak trees.
Afterward, we sat together and talked and ate a meal and decided to call this place Acorn.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

After much deliberation, the group has decided to stay on Bankole's land and begin farming. Lauren has carried the seeds of many different fruits, vegetables, and plants from the neighborhood, which she intends to plant. She distributes acorns to each member of the community to ceremonially plant during the mass funeral service. This passage thus confirms the role of acorns as a symbol of creation and rebirth in the midst of death and destruction. At this point, the community has begun to develop a shared goal and set of values, as emphasized by their participation in the ritual of the funeral.

At the same time, this shared understanding is based in a diverse set of experiences and preferences, which is shown through the fact that each person chooses to recite something different at the funeral: Bible passages, Earthseed passages, songs, and poems. In this way, the group has found a balance between inclusivity and exclusivity that will hopefully allow them to survive as a community. Although they are inherently exclusive based on their isolation on Bankole's property, they are also inclusive, embracing members with a variety of different backgrounds and hopes for the future.

> A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And others fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bore fruit an hundredfold.

Related Characters: Lauren Olamina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 328-329

Explanation and Analysis

The newly-formed Earthseed community living at Acorn has just held a mass funeral for their dead. Members of the community have recited Bible passages, Earthseed passages, poems, and songs. The book ends with the passage above: the Biblical Parable of the Sower. Like most passages from scripture, the parable invites multiple interpretations. However, the main message of the parable is that faith in God needs to be sown in "good ground"—meaning the faithful hearts and minds of believers. When people who have the right mindset hear the message of Jesus, they are open and receptive and can develop a relationship with God. However, when people who are morally corrupt or narrow-minded hear the message of Jesus, nothing grows—they do not become believers.

Of course, Earthseed does not require adherents to receive a message from God as such, and neither does it demand that they become faithful believers in the same way as Christians. However, Earthseed communities must also be founded on the right principles in order for Earthseed to flourish. The "good ground" of the original Earthseed community is both physical—Bankole's property, which has been renamed "Acorn"—and also metaphorical, referring to the loving, supportive, and dedicated community that has planted itself there.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The book opens in the year 2024, and the first chapter is preceded by a quote from a book called *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*, which asserts that "the only lasting truth is Change" and that "God is Change." In her diary, Lauren Olamina writes that on the night before her 15th birthday and her father's 55th, she had one of her recurring dreams. In the dream, she is teaching herself to fly, but ends up flying into a wall of fire. She tries desperately to escape, but is consumed by the flames. Sometimes she wakes up at this point, but on this night she keeps dreaming; she at first descends into darkness and then begins to see stars.

It is too early on in the book to know what Lauren's dream means exactly, but there are several important clues. At 15, Lauren is still a young person learning how to exist in the world, and this perhaps explains the fact that in her dream she is teaching herself to fly. Flight may thus represent maturity, independence, and freedom from her family. The presence of fire also suggests that this process is dangerous and might be destructive.

On another night, while they are hanging out laundry, Lauren's stepmother Cory tells her that due to light pollution, it didn't use to be possible to see as many stars as they can now. They speak in Spanish, Cory's first language. Cory says her mother used to say that stars were windows into heaven, and that she believed her for "almost a year." She tells Lauren that kids can't imagine how bright the cities used to be. Lauren says she'd rather have stars. Cory says that they can "afford" stars because they're free, but that she'd rather have the city lights again.

This passage introduces the idea that there are positive sides even to seemingly negative change. Although it's not yet clear what has happened to the world to cause the darkness and poverty described in this passage, it's clear that Cory laments these changes and wishes the world would go back to how it once was. However, Lauren is able to see the positive side to this change.

CHAPTER 2

Lauren admits that three years ago she stopped believing in her father's God and church, but that because she is a "coward" she is letting herself be baptized into that church today. Lauren's father is a Baptist minister who holds services in their front room every Sunday, thereby allowing people to attend church without having to go outside, where everything is "dangerous and crazy." Lauren's father goes to work once a week, but neither Lauren nor any of the other children go out to school anymore. For the baptism, Lauren's father made a deal with a friend who is the minister of a church with a physical building just beyond the "wall." Lauren's father also once also had a physical church of his own, but it was destroyed.

The beginning of this chapter evokes a world in which people are trying to cling to a semblance of normality in the midst of division and destruction. Despite the fact that Lauren and her family live behind a mysterious "wall" and it's too unsafe even to attend school, they make an effort not only to adhere to their faith, but also to engage in the rituals that characterize ordinary existence—such as going to a physical church in order to be baptized. This raises the question of whether clinging to normality is possible in the midst of so much change.

For the adults, going to a real church reminds them of the "good old days," whereas the kids just like the adventure of going beyond the neighborhood wall. Lauren's 12-year-old brother Keith is also being baptized, though he doesn't care about religion (or anything else). He is the oldest of Lauren's three brothers and the one Cory, their mother, loves best. He dreams of moving to Los Angeles one day. As the group travel outside the wall, they see people sleeping on the streets and a dirty, naked woman dart in front of them in a daze. They pass other gated communities, some of which are enclosed by walls made of rocks or trash. There are also people who just live out on the streets, and who now watch Lauren and her group closely. Lauren wishes she could have helped the naked woman, but knows it would be too dangerous.

Here we begin to learn more about what Lauren's world is actually like. Keith's desire to move to Los Angeles indicates that the book is set in the United States, although it is a version of the nation that most readers are unlikely to recognize. The naked woman and gated communities sealed off with rocks and trash evoke a decidedly post-apocalyptic landscape, in which ordinary people must barricade themselves from the wider world simply in order to survive. Indeed, it is this demand of survival that stops Lauren from helping the woman, even though she would like to.

They are in Robledo, a city 20 miles away from Los Angeles that was once "unwalled" and "green." After Lauren's father's parents were murdered in 2010, he inherited their house, where he and his family still live.

Butler adds more details to situate the reader in this violent and divided post-apocalyptic world.

Meanwhile Lauren notices that the people outside the neighborhood gate often have missing limbs, open wounds, and festering sores, which makes it difficult for Lauren to be around them. Lauren's father believes that she can choose to overcome her "hyperempathy" syndrome, and though Lauren admits that sharing other people's pain is ultimately "delusional," there is nothing she can do to stop it. Her father is ashamed of Lauren's hyperempathy, as it is a reminder that—though he is "a preacher and a professor and a dean"—his first wife was a drug addict who abused a drug called Paraceto when she was pregnant with Lauren, thereby giving Lauren hyperempathy syndrome. Lauren's mother died in childbirth.

Lauren's parents are presented as opposites of one another. Whereas Lauren's father is a distinguished and respectable person who tries desperately to cling onto a sense of dignity and normalcy, her mother was an addict whose drug use permanently damaged her unborn child. Yet this passage also suggests that in order to maintain a semblance of normalcy, Lauren's father must live in denial about reality. He insists that Lauren is able to get over her hyperempathy syndrome, even though it is a condition she has had since birth. Although Lauren's father is shown to be a good man, his denial of the truth is a point of weakness.

Hyperempathy involves sharing both pleasure and pain, but the people around Lauren rarely feel pleasure. Lauren enjoys sex, though as a preacher's daughter in a tiny gated community, she sometimes wishes she didn't. Along with Lauren's brothers Keith and Marcus, there are four other kids about to be baptized, including Curtis Talcott. Lauren wishes Curtis weren't there, yet resents the fact that she cares what he thinks about her.

Clearly, Lauren is very mature for her age. Having been raised as a minister's daughter, she is highly critical of Christianity, yet equally does not reject it outright.

The church has security bars, "Lazor wire," and armed guards. Lauren is baptized last and wishes she wasn't going through with it. She reflects on people's different ideas about God, and thinks about a hurricane that is currently killing hundreds of people along the gulf of Mexico. She considers all the people suffering and dying and wonders if it is a "sin against God to be poor." Lauren's neighborhood is getting poorer, as there are fewer and fewer jobs and more and more children. The adults say things will get better, but Lauren does not believe them. Lauren's favorite book in the Bible is the Book of Job, where God seems like "a big kid" playing with—and carelessly destroying—his toys.

To Lauren, Biblical teachings about a loving God seem incoherent with the reality of the world around her—a world in which a church looks like a high-security prison. Her consideration of whether it is a "sin against God to be poor" emphasizes the extent to which justice is distributed along lines of wealth, rather than moral or religious virtue. Indeed, Lauren's own experience reflects this theme of economic injustice; although she and her family do not seem to be especially rich, they at least have more money than the street poor who live beyond their gated community. In the world of the novel, having access to money is a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter is preceded by a quote from the *Book of the Living* that emphasizes that followers of Earthseed do not "worship God," but instead "shape God." In her diary, Lauren writes that an astronaut named Alicia Leal on the latest Mars mission has been killed. People in Lauren's neighborhood generally consider space travel a waste of money. The price of water has gone up again, and gasoline is far cheaper than water, but nobody uses gasoline except arsonists and the rich. It is fashionable to look dirty, and Lauren and her siblings have filthy clothes to wear outside the wall in order to keep themselves safe.

This passage emphasizes the contrast between wealth and poverty established at the end of the last chapter. While ordinary people are so poor that it has become fashionable to wear filthy clothing, the government still has enough money to send astronauts to Mars. On one level, society has regressed to a more primitive, survivalist state, but on another, technology has continued to bring new, futuristic possibilities.

The last "Window Wall television" in Lauren's neighborhood has gone out. It belonged to the Yannis family, who charged a small fee to let people come and look at it. Now there are only three "ancient" TV sets in the neighborhood, although every house still has a radio, the main source of news. Before Alicia Leal died, she asked that her body be left on Mars, but the Secretary of Astronautics insisted on bringing it back to Earth in case it proved to be a contaminant. Lauren notes that Secretaries of Astronautics don't tend to know much about science. One of the Presidential candidates, Christopher Morpeth Donner, has promised to eradicate the space program if he is elected. Lauren's father agrees with this policy and plans to vote for Donner. Lauren believes that space is the future, and that even though Mars is cold and empty, it is also a kind of heaven.

Once again, Lauren's views about the world directly contradict the views of her father (and, it seems, society at large). Whereas Lauren's father and the government believe that space exploration is a waste of money, Lauren is convinced that it is a vital part of the future. This is further evidence of the fact that while the adults around Lauren remain attached to the past, Lauren's focus is firmly fixed on the future. Lauren's reflection about Secretaries of Astronautics not knowing much about science emphasizes her belief that she is more knowledgeable and clear-sighted than the adults running the country.

Mrs. Sims, a devoutly Christian woman in Lauren's neighborhood, has shot herself. She was the only person Lauren knew who lived alone, and she was frightened by people of other races and religions. She was once robbed by three men who tied her up and raped her. They took all her cash and possessions, and Mrs. Sims begged Lauren's father for help even though she didn't like him because he had a Mexican wife. Two days before Mrs. Sims committed suicide, her son and his family were killed in an arson attack. Lauren thinks it may have been a "revenge fire" or possibly because of a new drug that encourages people to start fires. Lauren is shocked by her death, because Mrs. Sims believed that suicide was punished by hell. Life on earth was so unbearable that Mrs. Sims chose to exchange it for eternal suffering.

Mrs. Sims' suicide is an important early turning point in the novel. The event highlights an increasing sense of desperation, the limits of religious faith, and the sense that Christian understandings of God are incoherent with the reality of the post-apocalyptic United States in the year 2024. The fact that Mrs. Sims chooses eternal damnation over earthly suffering raises important questions about religious devotion: Is it possible that life on earth could be worse than hell? Is the concept of hell too abstract for people to really believe in? Would a just God really send Mrs. Sims to hell?

Lauren cannot stop thinking about Mrs. Sims and Alicia Leal; she feels that the two stories are related somehow. She has started writing down her ideas about God, but feels that she isn't expressing them well yet. She writes that "God is Power," "God is Pliable," and "God is Change," adding: "This is the literal truth." Lauren believes that prayer does not affect God, and that God neither loves her nor hates her, but simply exists. Different traditions of thought—from physics to Buddhism to Christianity—hold that change is inevitable, and people pretend to accept change. However, in reality people still "create super-people" who they imagine will protect them from change (or, in Lauren's view, from God). Part of her wishes she could ignore reality and live a "normal life," but she is consumed by her ideas and beliefs about God, and knows she must act on them.

At this point, it becomes clear that the Earthseed scripture that begins each chapter has actually been written by Lauren. Lauren treats her ideas about God not simply as a matter of personal belief, but rather as an important trigger for action. She feels compelled to write down her views on God and to use them to guide her actions. This could seem somewhat delusional or narcissistic; however, Lauren's beliefs about God are not rooted in the arbitrary thoughts in her own mind, but rather her observations about the world—including existing religious traditions.

The sitting president has lost the election to Christopher Donner. Donner promises to dismantle the space program within a year, and plans to suspend environmental and labor protection laws in order to end mass unemployment. Lauren worries about this, and notes that her father didn't vote for Donner in the end—he couldn't bring himself to vote at all.

Lauren's father tries to maintain hope for the future, but his decision not to vote indicates that on some level, he has given up on his belief that the world could ever go back to the way it once was.

CHAPTER 4

It is a year later, 2025. Chapter 4 is preceded by two quotes from *The Book of the Living*, one that warns that intelligence can be dangerous, and another that argues that victims of God can find the power to shape God. Lauren then says that a three-year-old girl in her neighborhood, Amy Dunn, started a fire in her family's garage. The neighborhood has a plan for fires, which they execute successfully. Lauren worries about what will happen to Amy, whose mother, Tracy, was only twelve when she got pregnant with her as a result of being raped by her uncle. Sixteen members of the Dunn family live in the same house, and they are known for being crazy. Amy mostly plays alone in the dirt. Lauren asks Cory if Amy could be allowed to start school early, offering to help look after her, and Cory agrees.

Even within the enclosed community of Lauren's neighborhood, some people are excluded and seen as inferior to the other residents. The Dunn family's reputation for being crazy—including the tragic story of Tracy's incestuous rape and subsequent neglect of Amy—suggests that they are outcasts within the neighborhood. The fact that Amy starts a fire emphasizes the fact that she is a destructive presence. Although she is only a young child and should bring joy to her family, in reality she is another reminder of their struggle and misery.

Mrs. Sims's cousins Wardell Parrish and Rosalee Payne inherit her house. They are twins whose spouses have both died. They are suspicious that residents of Lauren's neighborhood robbed Mrs. Sim's house in the aftermath of her death, even after Lauren's father assures them that they are a small community who depend on one another and thus who wouldn't do something like rob a dead woman's house. Lauren doesn't like Payne and Parrish and doesn't want to have to depend on them.

This passage emphasizes the fragility and precariousness of community. While the community of people in Lauren's neighborhood helps residents to survive by providing a system of mutual support, as soon as an untrustworthy or malicious person enters this community, there is a risk of everything falling apart.

Lauren is on her way to target practice with a group of kids and adults when they run into a pack of feral dogs. Half of Lauren's group is white and half black, which can sometimes cause problems, as society is becoming increasingly hostile to interracial socializing. At first the day goes smoothly, but then Curtis and his brother Michael get into an argument with Peter Moss, whose father, Richard, is a "total shit" with three wives and a sexist attitude toward women. Richard practices his own religion, a combination of Old Testament and West African ideas. He is an engineer for a water company and can thus afford to pick up homeless women and make them his wives. Lauren has heard that this kind of arrangement is happening more frequently, and wonders if this is what the future will be like.

The case of Richard Moss further emphasizes the fact that, in the world of the novel, money allows people to behave as they please. Richard's polygamous ways may be met with disapproval within his community, but the fact that he works for a water company puts him in a position of privilege that overrides the judgment of other people. Richard's idiosyncratic religious beliefs are also significant. Clearly, Lauren is not the only person adapting existing religious traditions to suit her own purposes and a rapidly changing world.

Lauren's father encourages her to practice shooting birds and squirrels with BB guns. She suspects that he wants to know if this will trigger her hyperempathy, which it doesn't. Lauren wonders if she would be able to shoot a person if she needed to, and whether if she did so she would also die. Her father always carries a gun when he leaves the neighborhood. Cory also has a gun, which she's lent to Lauren that day. In the past people were sometimes resistant to gun ownership, but now every household has at least two guns hidden away. Kids are taught to handle guns in school and, once they leave at 15, are taken to target practice as a "rite of passage." Lauren's shooting is going well when a feral dog walks over. She is standing with her friend Joanne Garfield, who immediately begins to panic. The dog runs away into the bushes.

Life in 2025 America is far harsher than in the contemporary era. Whereas in the present, people are generally careful to protect the innocence of children and to discourage gun use among the young, in the world of the novel this is no longer possible. Violence and danger are unavoidable facts of life for Lauren and her community. As the appearance of the feral dog demonstrates, this threat comes as much from the natural environment as it does from other people. It's also notable that dogs in the world of the book are always feral and dangerous—never pets or companions. This reflects the way that humans themselves have become varying degrees of "feral" in post-apocalyptic America.

Another member of the group panics and almost shoots Michael while aiming at a dog. This causes an argument within the group, some of who are more afraid of feral dogs than others. Suddenly, Lauren's father insists that they all go home. It is only later that Lauren learns it was because her father had found a group of half-eaten corpses––a mother and her two young children. The group keeps walking and hears three shots, then comes across the dog they had seen. It has been shot and is twitching in pain. Lauren is overcome with pain and feels that she is about to throw up. Lauren shoots the dog, feels the blow of the bullet, and almost collapses. Curtis smiles at her and expresses admiration at her shooting ability. Lauren keeps walking in a state of shock.

This passage reveals an ironic consequence of Lauren's hyperempathy. While the name of the condition itself emphasizes the fact that it forces Lauren to be more empathetic with others, the condition also means that Lauren is compelled to kill a person or animal who is suffering in order to save herself from the pain. While in the case of the feral dog this is undoubtedly for the best, it creates a dilemma for Lauren when she is faced with suffering humans.

CHAPTER 5

It is raining for the first time in six years. At church, the congregation joyfully sings hymns as thunder and lightning rage outside. People in the neighborhood put out buckets to collect the rainwater. The next day it is still raining, and Lauren runs outside, happily getting soaked. The day after that Lauren learns that Amy Dunn is dead. Lauren is in a state of shock, as she had come to feel close to Amy, making a habit of walking her home after school. Someone from outside the neighborhood shot through the metal wall, likely not aiming at anyone in particular but the "wealth and privilege" of the neighborhood in general. The wall is supposed to be bulletproof but is not entirely secure. Residents of the neighborhood hear gunfire constantly, and so no one would have immediately noticed the sound of the shot that killed Amy. Lauren had been planning on hosting a small party for Amy's fourth birthday, which was only weeks away.

As the community's reaction to the rain indicates, ordinary phenomena that many people in our present reality might take for granted are treated as an exceptional blessing in the world of the novel. This is further emphasized by the death of Amy. Lauren's neighborhood may seem like a safe place where the residents are protected, but in reality this very security creates a risk of retaliation by those on the outside. The fact that Amy is an innocent toddler does not protect her from hostility and violence. Her tragic death highlights the utter ruthlessness of the world in which Lauren lives.

By the next day Amy's body has already been cremated. Her mother, Tracy, never liked Amy but now cannot stop crying. The Dunn family has "spent money they do not have" trying to get the police to find Amy's murderer, although this will realistically be impossible. Joanne comes over to have lunch in Lauren's bedroom. Lauren loves the privacy of having her own room, especially considering that most houses in the neighborhood are overcrowded with people. Joanne points out that Lauren was one of the only people who cared about Amy. Lauren says that Amy's death has revealed an undeniable truth—that Amy's death is a "wake-up call" to the fate of the rest of the neighborhood. Joanne agrees with Lauren, but argues that there is nowhere to go. Joanne cannot afford college and won't be able to get a job that would allow her to move out of her parents' house.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Lauren has a profoundly different way of thinking to the rest of the people living in her neighborhood. The conditions of life in 2025 have caused most people to believe that they have no hope of changing or improving their own futures, and thus they resign themselves to simply struggling to survive and hoping for a better life after death. Although Joanne, like Lauren, is a young person with her whole life ahead of her, she is convinced that she will never be able to leave the neighborhood or even her parents' house. Lauren, however, has a far more imaginative, proactive relationship to her future.

Lauren admits that she heard on the radio that cholera is spreading throughout the South, and that the drug that makes people want to commit arson is growing in popularity throughout the country. There are tornadoes in the South, a blizzard in the Midwest, and a measles epidemic on the East Coast. Joanne says her mother hopes that President Donner will make everything go back to "normal," but the girls agree this will not happen. However, when Lauren says that they must take action in order to prepare for the future, Joanne balks and protests that at only 15, there is nothing they can do. Lauren insists that life in the neighborhood is not sustainable, and that one day people will "blast the gate open." Joanne refuses to believe this. Lauren takes a bite of acorn bread—one of her favorite foods—yet cannot even taste it.

Throughout the novel, many characters place hope in figures that they believe will save them from the miserable reality of their lives, and these figures include God and President Donner. However, both Lauren and Joanne know that this is a hopeless position to take. This sense of hopelessness is emphasized when Lauren cannot even taste the acorn bread she is eating. Acorns are a symbol of hope and new life, but the conversation with Joanne makes Lauren feel disconnected from her sense of hope in her own future.

Joanne suggests that her mother may be right about Donner, but Lauren denies this, arguing that Donner is only a false symbol of hope. Lauren notes that during the bubonic plague, many people thought the world was ending. However, some of the survivors were able to see that the plague left a lot of land vacant and a large demand for workers, and took advantages of these opportunities.

Lauren argues that Joanne is denying the truth by placing hope in Donner and assuming that their neighborhood will be a safe and sustainable place to live forever.

Lauren shows Joanne a pile of books about survival in the wilderness, medical emergencies, and living off the land. She admits that she is alarmed by how little she knows, but adds: "I intend to survive." Joanne replies that Lauren has been reading "too many adventure stories," but Lauren insists that Joanne take her seriously. Joanne says that books won't save them; Lauren responds that nothing will save them except themselves. She gives Joanne a book about plants and insists she read it. The next day, the rain stops, and Lauren wonders how many years it will be until it rains again.

While Lauren sees Joanne as being in denial, Joanne views Lauren's interest in adaptation and survival as another kind of delusion, fed by reading "adventure stories." This conflict highlights the fact that people find it difficult to understand the world around them and cope with reality. Of course, the world in which Joanne and Lauren live is a kind of post-apocalyptic adventure story, as The Parable of the Sower *is, after all, a science fiction novel. Yet Joanne in particular remains in denial of the nature of their reality.*

CHAPTER 6

The chapter opens with the following quote from *The Book of the Living*: "Drowning people sometimes die fighting their rescuers." Lauren writes that Joanne told her mother about their conversation, and that the news got to Lauren's father. Lauren is furious, but grateful that they at least didn't discuss religion (though she had wanted to). Lauren's father comes home and sternly asks her if she thinks the world is coming to an end, to which Lauren wants to reply: "No, I think *your* world is coming to an end." However, instead she simply says "yes." Lauren's father warns her that speaking in this way "frightens people," so it's best to avoid the topic.

This passage emphasizes the differences and conflict between Lauren and her father, particularly when Lauren implies that they are living in different worlds. Lauren's father scolds her for simply discussing what she believes to be the truth.

Lauren is angry, but decides to change the subject by asking if her father got back the book she lent to Joanne, about California plants and the way Native Americans used them. Lauren's father smiles and explains the book is the reason why they eat acorn bread, which is not generally consumed in America.

It becomes clear that Lauren and her father actually do not hold such different worldviews after all. The books from which Lauren has derived her ideas about adaptation and survival belong to her father, and his explanation about the acorn bread shows that he, too, has chosen to learn from the past in order to help his family survive in the present.

Lauren's father asks Lauren if she tried to persuade Joanne to run away, which is what Joanne's father claims. Lauren tells her father everything she actually did say, and afterward he makes her promise not to talk about it anymore. Lauren refuses, instead suggesting that they make "earthquake packs" as a way of preparing for disaster without alarming the community. Her father remains stern, explaining: "It is better to teach people than to scare them." However, he then suggests that she uses the book about plants to teach her kindergartners.

Both Lauren and her father are remarkably strong-willed, and both have powerful convictions about the best way in which to lead the community. Although they sometimes disagree about how to deal with danger and survival, both place a strong emphasis on preparedness and education.

Lauren's father then admits that Lauren's idea about the earthquake packs is good, and promises that he will raise it at the next neighborhood meeting. He suggests that Lauren try to find out if anyone in the community knows martial arts and would be willing to teach others. Lauren agrees and promises to try not to scare anyone else. Her father is pleased, and tells her it's time she found out where the "important things" are buried in their back yard.

The fact that Lauren's father has not yet told her about the "important things" in the back yard suggests that he has been waiting until Lauren is old enough to carry the responsibility of this knowledge. This is arguably not because he thought Lauren was too immature for this responsibility, but rather because he had been trying to preserve her innocence as his child for as long as possible.

The next day, Lauren's father preaches from the part of Genesis that describes Noah and the ark. After church, Joanne apologizes, and Lauren halfheartedly accepts. As Joanne walks away, Lauren reflects sadly that she can never trust her again and that she has lost her best friend. A few nights later, thieves rob some of the neighborhood gardens, stealing fruit and ruining the plots. Lauren's father decides to set up a regular night watch, in which two people patrol together in two-hour shifts. He suggests that the patrol begins before dusk, to get the neighbors used to the idea of the patrol and make sure no one mistakes the patrollers for thieves.

It's clear that Lauren's father is also waking up to the reality of the threats that the neighborhood faces, and is making sure to employ extra precautions as a result. Lauren, meanwhile, is isolated as a result of her commitment to the truth. Even though she is somewhat forgiving of Joanne, she knows that Joanne's reaction to their conversation means that their friendship will never be the same. Lauren has been forced to choose the truth over comfort and appeasement.

That night, Lauren overhears her father and Cory discussing what they will do if they catch a thief. Lauren's father says he would try to scare them off, and Cory asks if he would shoot them if that didn't work. Lauren's father replies that he would. They begin to fight, and Cory starts crying. Cory worries about her husband being sent to prison, and softly tells him: "Thou shallt not kill." Lauren's father replies: "Nehemiah four. Verse 14." They are quiet after this, and Lauren immediately looks up Nehemiah 4:14 in the Bible. The verse instructs people to fight on behalf of their families and houses.

This passage raises the question of what people of faith should do when scripture contradicts itself—and what they must do when scripture contradicts reality. While Lauren's father and Cory find comfort and guidance in the Bible, this is undermined by the fact that the Bible itself sometimes gives conflicting messages about how to live.

A few days later the night watch becomes official. Once a week, the watchers meet for shooting and martial arts practice. Lauren's father takes all his books back from her, but she doesn't mind as she has already made notes. A week later, thieves return to steal Richard Moss's rabbits. The rabbits are housed in what was once a three-car garage built in the 1980s. The two thieves cram 13 rabbits into a bag, but at this point the watchers on duty see them and fire their guns into the air. The thieves run, dropping the rabbits along with a gun.

The fact that there have been multiple instances of theft suggests that the neighborhood will not be safe for much longer—things are getting worse.

This causes another argument between Lauren's father and Cory, who points out that the thieves could have easily killed someone. Lauren's father focuses on the fact that the watchers stuck to the plan and that it worked, but Cory dismisses this, focusing on the fact that the family wouldn't survive if something happened to Lauren's father. He insists that they would have to find a way to keep going. Lauren realizes that she, too, is in denial about the prospect of something happening to her father. Yet she also knows that things cannot go on like this, and that there must be a "better destiny."

Lauren admits that she, too, has her blind spots regarding the future and the possible threats her family faces. While Lauren vehemently rejects the practice of investing false hope and assurance in God-like figures, to some extent she engages in this behavior when it comes to her father. She has never properly considered the possibility that her father may die, and what would become of her and her family if that were to happen. Despite Lauren's commitment to embracing the truth in the face of widespread denial, she still finds herself slipping into willful ignorance when it comes to the person who matters most—her father.

CHAPTER 7

The quote that begins Chapter 7 emphasizes that everything in the universe is "Godseed," and that "Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths." In her diary, Lauren writes that she has finally found a name for her religion: Earthseed. The name comes to her as she is gardening; she thinks about the fact that seeds cannot move on their own, yet are still spread across the world, and that this is how plant species survive. She believes that one day a lot of people will be part of Earthseed, and they will have to "seed" themselves far away from Earth in order to survive.

This passage relates Earthseed to one of the most important symbols in the book: the acorn. Like acorns, seeds in general convey a sense of hope in the future. Life on Earth is characterized by death and destruction, and therefore Lauren is convinced that people must travel beyond Earth in order to embrace the possibility of growth and life.

Lauren doesn't believe that she has invented Earthseed; rather, it is something she has developed based on observation. She has encountered a paradox in the fact that the universe exists to shape God, and God exists to shape the universe. She says this feels like "the truest thing I've ever written." She has begun gathering all the notes she has made about God and Earthseed into a single book, and hopes that one day she will be able to teach other people based on these verses.

Although there are ways in which Lauren resembles a prophet of her new religion, she is careful to emphasize that—unlike prophets from existing religions—her ideas about Earthseed have not resulted from direct divine inspiration. Rather, they have arrived indirectly through Lauren's observations about the world and God. In this sense, Earthseed can be seen as a scientific religion rooted in nature.

Lauren has packed a survival pack for herself, including almost a thousand dollars in savings, which will be enough to feed her for two weeks or less. However, she knows that the price of food keeps rising. She wishes she could pack a gun and asks her father to let her keep one in her room, but he refuses. Lauren knows that her father worries about her brothers finding it, and concludes that he might be right to worry. She asks him where they would go if they were forced out of the neighborhood, and her father says that the college where he works has temporary accommodation they could stay in. They would then have to work on finding and rebuilding a new home. Lauren asks if he would ever leave voluntarily to go north, and he says no. In her Earthseed notebook Lauren writes: "A tree cannot grow in its parents' shadows."

Lauren still relies on her father for resources, guidance, and support. However, the gulf between their different worldviews is growing. Lauren's father remains deeply invested in the communities and institutions that have protected him and his family so far—namely, the gated neighborhood and college where he works. However, Lauren is convinced that these communities will not protect them for much longer, and that they must therefore prepare for change and survival in a new environment. Although she is still inexperienced, Lauren's youth allows her to focus on the future in a way that her father cannot.

Lauren listens to a radio report about an Anglo-Japanese moon station that has found planets orbiting other stars that could possibly bear life. She pays close attention to this kind of news, as she firmly believes that there is life on other planets. She thinks it might only be possible for humans to live on these other worlds if they had no connection back to the "parent world," Earth.

Lauren hopes that humanity will be able to move to new planets and survive, and interestingly connects this idea to a kind of "parent-child" relationship. Just as Lauren herself must break free from her father to live fully and find the truth, so these hypothetical new worlds can only thrive when severed from their "parent world" of Earth.

It is the day before her 16th birthday, and Lauren can't wait to be older. Tracy Dunn has disappeared; ever since Amy died, she has been talking about wanting to die, and now people believe that Tracy walked outside the neighborhood wall. Lauren's "birthday gift" to herself is a sentence of scripture: "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." At the moment, this destiny seems impossible, as President Donner and other leaders are dismantling their countries' space programs. Lauren doesn't know when or how, but is certain that Earthseed will get to "heaven" eventually.

Lauren is surrounded by hopelessness. This is shown both by Tracy Dunn's apparent suicide—her decision to walk beyond the neighborhood wall is understood to mean her death—and by President Donner's dismantling of the space program. The adults around Lauren have clearly lost their belief that the world could get better. Lauren, however, is convinced not only that another way of life is possible, but also that this way of life could even be akin to a kind of "heaven." Although it is not yet clear exactly what Lauren means by this, her belief in heaven combines religious ideas about a divine afterlife and the physical "heavens"—i.e. outer space.

CHAPTER 8

A week later Tracy still hasn't returned, which almost certainly means that she's dead. Meanwhile, Bianca Montoya, another girl in the neighborhood, is pregnant at 17. She isn't married to the baby's father, and there is a "feud" between their families, although Lauren is glad that they are at least both Latino because fights over interracial couplings are intense. Getting married and having children seems crazy to Lauren given the state of the world, but she knows it is what the neighborhood expects her to do. Bianca is making preparations for the wedding, and Lauren admits she doesn't know "whether Bianca is brave or stupid." Lauren really likes Curtis and may love him, but says if marriage, children, and more poverty were the only things lying in her future she'd kill herself.

Once again, Lauren's feelings about the future are in opposition with those held by most people in the neighborhood. While at times Lauren seems more hopeful than others about the possibility of a better life, she also rejects the notion of having children on account of the danger and difficulty of life in the present. She considers the possibility that Bianca and others who have children are "brave," yet seems to be more convinced that they are in fact "stupid," attempting to carry on a semblance of normalcy and thereby denying reality.

At the next target practice the group finds another corpse; one woman refuses to participate in target practice anymore after this. The oldest Payne kids still come, even though their uncle Wardell has been saying rude things about Lauren's father. Keith, who is almost 13, begged to come even though he knows he is not allowed before he is 15. Lauren is disturbed by the sight of more skeletal people living in makeshift shacks beyond the neighborhood wall. Later, Lauren's family discover that Keith stole Cory's key and has left the neighborhood. Lauren's father goes out to look for Keith, refusing Lauren and Marcus's offers to help, and telling them to stay inside. Suddenly, Lauren sees a shadow moving across their neighbors' porch, and then Cory hears a strange sound coming from inside the Olaminas' house. Lauren's father investigates, taking his gun with him.

Like Lauren, Keith is also desperate to grow up—yet his desire for adulthood seems far more reckless and destructive than that of his older sister. It is significant that both Keith and Tracy Dunn have recently volunteered to leave the neighborhood. Both Keith and Tracy are young people who are perfectly aware of the dangers of the world beyond the neighborhood gate, yet choose to go anyway. Although it doesn't seem that Keith is on the same suicide mission as Tracy, both characters exhibit a nihilistic attitude toward life and a refusal to follow the rules and customs of the neighborhood.

Soon, Lauren's father shouts for her to come inside the house. Keith is lying on the kitchen floor, wounded and filthy, surrounded by their siblings. Keith explains that he was attacked by five men, who stole the key to the neighborhood gate. Lauren's father immediately runs out of the house, likely to warn others in the neighborhood. They will make new keys the next day. Keith curls up on the floor, knowing he will be harshly punished not only for losing the key but also for losing a set of clothes and pair of shoes. Lauren cleans up the blood and makes dinner for the family.

Keith is apparently fully aware of the threats he faces; he simply seems not to care about them. This does not bode well for Keith's safety or the safety of his family and neighborhood.

The next day Keith is forced to confess what he did at church and apologize to his parents, the community, and God. Lauren's father does not hit him, but instead asks over and over how he could be so stupid. Keith says that he wanted to prove he was a man; after two hours, he finally promises that he won't do it again. Keith is not intelligent, but is highly stubborn. Lauren observes that he silently holds onto his anger.

To some extent, Keith's pre-teen angst and desire to prove himself as a man is one of the most "normal" aspects of the narrative. Although Keith's issues are certainly exacerbated by the fact that he lives in a gated community amidst an apocalyptic landscape, the struggle of wanting to grow up fast and rebel against authority is universal. However, in the dangerous and unforgiving world of the novel, there is little room for such struggles.

CHAPTER 9

The Earthseed scripture that opens this chapter states that "all struggles are essentially power struggles." On Keith's birthday, Lauren's father and Cory give him a BB gun. Keith shoots birds, threatens to shoot Marcus, and then disappears, taking the gun with him. At the time Lauren is writing, Keith has been missing for 18 hours. The next day Lauren's father goes looking for Keith, even calling the police despite the fact that he cannot afford their fee. Cory is distraught, so Lauren takes over her teaching. Some of the older students walk out, knowing that Lauren only finished high school two years before. Since then she has been doing college work with her father.

Once again, Lauren is shown to be more mature and wise than either of her parents. While her father's decision to give Keith a BB gun was clearly misguided, Cory is so emotionally wrecked by Keith's disappearance that Lauren must take over her teaching. The adults' increasing inability to maintain control over life in the neighborhood suggests that Lauren may soon have to rebel against their authority and act on her own beliefs.

The next day there is still no sign of Keith. Cory seems to believe that he is dead, and accuses Lauren's father of not trying hard enough to find him, even claiming that he loves Lauren more than he loves Keith. Lauren is stunned to hear her say this, as she and Cory have a close relationship. It has always confused Lauren why Keith is Cory's favorite. Lauren's father assures Lauren that Cory doesn't mean what she says and that she loves Lauren like a daughter, but Lauren doesn't believe him.

Keith's disappearance creates an unbridgeable emotional rift within Lauren's family. Note that at only 16, Lauren has a clear and unsentimental understanding of the adults around her, including their vulnerabilities and flaws. Although she loves Cory, she refuses to deny the reality of Cory's negative feelings about her.

Two days later, Keith reappears without a scratch, wearing new clothes and shoes. Lauren's father immediately destroys the BB gun, before viciously beating Keith. Afterward, Keith cries while Cory holds him. Marcus, traumatized, asks to sleep in Lauren's room that night. Keith disappears and returns again, although this time their father doesn't look for him. Lauren feels a strong sense of hatred toward Keith. On returning, Keith hands Cory a large roll of cash, which Lauren knows "must be stolen money or drug money or worse." He gives the younger children expensive chocolate, but nothing to Lauren and Marcus. Before Lauren's father comes back, Keith leaves again. He promises Cory that he knows what he is doing and will bring back money and gifts.

Although Keith is still only a child, he is suddenly able to exercise a significant amount of power over the family. By disobeying the rules of the family, neighborhood, and assumedly the country at large, Keith exceeds what is expected of him as a 12-year-old, both in a positive and negative sense. On one hand, he is rebelling against his father and likely breaking the law. Yet at the same time, he is providing for his family and demonstrating that he can take care of himself.

CHAPTER 10

The narrative jumps ahead to the year 2026. Lauren writes that Keith has come back again. He is almost 14 now, and very tall. Keith tells Lauren that he's "got a room" in a building, which Lauren takes to mean he's squatting with a gang or a group of prostitutes or drug addicts. Lauren asks if his friends know how old he is, and Keith replies that of course they don't. Lauren cooks them rabbit stew and acorn bread. After years of mutual dislike, Keith now talks to Lauren more than anyone else in the family. He tells her that the building looks "nasty" on the outside, but that inside it is filled with hi-tech amenities. He explains that the people he lives with need him around because he can read and write, and they are all illiterate. He helps them to read the instructions on their equipment so they can actually use it.

The fact that Keith and Lauren now talk more than they ever did before is puzzling. Lauren knows that Keith is engaging in dangerous, destructive, and likely immoral behavior, yet seems to have reached a kind of peace with him. Perhaps Keith has succeeded in his desire to demonstrate his maturity, leading Lauren to have a newfound respect for him. On the other hand, perhaps Lauren has simply acknowledged that there is nothing she can do to stop him engaging in this dangerous behavior—and thus she might as well know as much as possible about what he is doing.

Lauren knows Keith is lying, and that he must be earning money through theft or selling drugs. Keith asks if their father has ever beat Lauren, and she admits that the last time he did was when she was 12 and he caught her having sex with a neighborhood boy in the bushes. Keith says she was lucky not to get pregnant, and Lauren agrees. Keith calls their father a "bastard," and Lauren counters that he is "the best man I know." Lauren keeps asking Keith questions about his life outside, which makes him realize that Lauren wants to leave the neighborhood too. Eventually Keith explains that he initially slept in a cardboard box for three days and stole food. Eventually, he stole a "sleepsack" and some money from an old man, and started making his way to LA. Lauren notes that it has always been Keith's dream to move there.

Keith and Lauren's improved relationship seems to in part be based on the increased honesty with which they address each other. Although Lauren knows that Keith is lying about how he gets his money, he at least tells the truth about how he survived his first few days outside of the neighborhood. Lauren, meanwhile, confesses to her youthful sexual activity. Both siblings seem to appreciate the new candor of their relationship. While they are very different in many ways, both of them are precocious, independent, and stubborn, and both appreciate honesty.

Keith admits that he stole $23,000 from a man who'd come to LA from Alaska, before shooting him. He warns Lauren that she'd do better to stay in the neighborhood, marry Curtis, and have babies than go outside. He claims that Lauren would not be able to "last a day" because of her hyperempathy. Keith tells Lauren about "crazies" who take the drug that makes them want to watch fires. They shave off all their hair, paint their skin bright colors, and set fire to buildings and people. Keith swears that he's never tried the drug. He adds that most of the addicts are young people, and that he thinks people don't tend to live long after they start taking it.

Lauren and Keith's discussion reveals three possible paths for the life of a young person in their circumstances to take: stay in the neighborhood and have children (as Keith advises Lauren to do), leave the neighborhood and earn money through illegal activity (as Keith is doing), or become a drug addict and meet an early death. The presentation of these three options is notably bleak; recall the fact that Lauren earlier declared she would kill herself if her only option for the future was getting married and having babies, which is on all accounts the best option of the three. Will Lauren be able to build another future for herself—or is her life doomed before it has even started?

That evening, Keith gives presents to the family and offers to bring something for Lauren next time, but she refuses. The next Monday is Lauren's birthday. She has sex with Curtis using condoms he's managed to find. Keith comes over and gives Lauren some money as a present. She tries to give it back, but Keith refuses to take it.

In contrast to the bleak options for the future, there are still some small joys and seeds of hope in Lauren's life, like her birthday and her relationship with Curtis. Keith once again shows himself to be a provider for his family, even when his family doesn't want him to be.

Two days later, Cory and Lauren's father have to go downtown to identify Keith's body. Lauren is unable to write for three days. On Saturday, she says that writing may help her understand what has happened. Keith's skin had been cut away and burned, and his eyes had been burned out. It is clear that he had been tortured slowly. The police say that this is how drug dealers torture people, and that Keith must have either been stealing from or competing with them. The police treat Lauren's father suspiciously, especially after Wardell Parrish tells them about the fight he had with Keith. It is well known that the police often accuse people of crimes just for the sake of it—but no one else in the neighborhood will back up Wardell's story, so they drop it.

Keith's gruesome death confirms Lauren's suspicions that he was engaged in the drug trade. Despite his bravado, Keith was clearly no match for the brutal reality of life beyond the neighborhood wall. Of course, even within the neighborhood people treat each other in a brutal manner, as evidenced by Wardell Parrish's statement to the police. Wardell has no reason to create trouble for Lauren's father beyond the fact that he simply doesn't like him. Yet in the ugly world of the novel, needless cruelty is everywhere.

Lauren's father asks his friend, another reverend, to handle the funeral. Cory can't stop crying, but Lauren's father doesn't cry—he never has, although now Lauren wishes he would. It's only when Curtis points it out that Lauren notices that she herself hasn't cried either. Lauren's feelings about Keith remain mixed, and she resents how he "messed up" their family. She is still devastated by his death, and wishes that everyone had hyperempathy, because that way people wouldn't kill each other. Failing that, she wishes she could at least live among other people with the syndrome. Lauren does not regret the fact that she cannot cry over Keith, though she hopes that he rests in peace—"in his urn, in heaven, wherever."

At times Lauren expresses herself with great certainty—yet at other times, she seems just as conflicted and traumatized as anyone in her position would be. She is devastated by the loss of Keith, yet resents the destructive effect he had on their family both in life and in death. Her final sentence about Keith's resting place is also significant. Normally, when it comes to matters of religion, Lauren speaks with conviction and clarity. However, Keith's death seems to have thrown off her usual assuredness.

CHAPTER 11

Lauren writes that the community is falling apart. Another robbery has taken place; three thieves broke into the Cruz house and for some reason the alarm did not go off. They killed a 75-year-old woman who lived there before two of the younger men arrived and killed two of the thieves. This is the seventh "incident" since Keith's death, and Lauren notes the irony of the fact that her father and Cory have been giving money to the victims from the money Keith gave them—"stolen money to help victims of theft."

At the beginning of the novel, life in the neighborhood had a semblance of stability—even if that stability was predicated on the exclusion of the chaotic, brutal outside world. However, the chaos that lies beyond the neighborhood wall is steadily encroaching upon the community.

Lauren learns that a company called KSF has taken over the coastal city of Olivar. Olivar is richer than Robledo, but there are higher taxes and the city suffers from the fact that some of its land is unusable because of the encroaching shoreline. As a result, the citizens of Olivar agreed to let KSF privatize the city; in turn, KSF will expand the solar-powered desalination plant that supplies clean water. KSF eventually plans to take over many more cities and achieve a monopoly over water, energy, and agriculture in the Southwest. Some in Olivar are nervous about the plan, as there are examples of corporations who've bought towns and "cheated and abused" the residents. But others appear on the radio announcing how glad they are about the takeover.

At first it may seem as though KSF is a positive force in the world of the novel, providing the security and sustainability not available to ordinary people. However, there are distinctly sinister overtones to KSF's offer to house people securely in exchange for work. The fact that the company hopes to gain a monopoly over water, energy, and agriculture in the entire Southwest is particularly ominous. With total control over these essential resources, there would be no limit to KSF's power.

Lauren's father is dubious about the KSF scheme, but Cory says she wishes Robledo would be taken over, too. Lauren's father points out that Robledo is "too poor, too black, and too Hispanic" to appeal to corporations. When the radio announces that KSF are seeking nurses, teachers, and other professionals to move to Olivar and work for room and board, Cory decides to call. Lauren explains that the salaries in company towns tend to be too low for anyone to live on, so the residents quickly become indebted to the corporations and end up living in a situation of "debt slavery." Marcus and Cory point out that it would be safer in Olivar, but Lauren and her father remain firmly opposed to moving. Lauren's father points out that "freedom is dangerous… but it's precious, too." Cory bursts into tears and later Lauren finds her clutching Keith's urn in her room.

Lauren's family continues to splinter apart as they confront the impossible choices facing them in the future. Cory and Marcus are seduced by KSF's promise of safety and security, but Lauren and her father are skeptical. They understand that a company like KSF is working in its own interests, not in the interests of the workers it employs. They know that the KSF corporate towns will work according to an abusive, exploitative, and racist logic—they are Butler's vision of capitalism run rampant and unchecked. Cory, however, is so desperate to find an external force that will "save" her that she ignores these truths and invests hope in salvation by the company.

Marcus tells Lauren that the Garfields (Joanne's family) are planning on moving to Olivar, which makes Lauren sad. Marcus is now 12, "beautiful," and popular with the neighborhood girls. Lauren thinks that Olivar is "one face" of the future, and meditates on her own future. She resolves that as soon as she turns 18 the next year she will leave the neighborhood and start Earthseed.

The neighborhood may be falling apart, but this has ultimately strengthened Lauren's resolve about forging her own path in the future. As life in the neighborhood seems to be an increasingly unsustainable option, Lauren knows that she must leave in order to survive in the long term.

In the next entry, Lauren writes that she has decided to go north. She will use several old maps that used to belong to her grandparents. She wonders if there are people who will pay her to teach them literacy, and wonders if she would be able to teach Earthseed scripture alongside this. She has finally found a title for the book of scripture: "*Earthseed: The Book of the Living*," a twist on the Egyptian and Tibetan books of the dead. She notes that she doesn't care about being original, only about telling the truth. If she finds other people outside who are already preaching her truth, she will join them, and if not, she will teach it herself.

To some extent, Lauren's plans for going north seem naïve—she is using outdated maps and hopes that people will pay her to teach them to read and write, when in reality no one Lauren has ever met has money to spare. However, as Lauren herself argues throughout the book, even a naïve belief in a better future is better than denial of the truth or resignation to misery.

CHAPTER 12

The Garfields have been accepted by KSF and are moving to Olivar next month. Lauren goes to Joanne's house while she packs, and questions her about the move. At first Joanne is defensive, but she eventually admits that she is nervous and sad about leaving Harry Balter, her cousin and boyfriend. Lauren suggests that they could get married and Harry could come with them, but Joanne says Harry thinks Olivar is "a trap." Joanne asks Lauren if she will just stay in the neighborhood, marry Curtis, and have babies, and Lauren lies, saying that she's not sure. Lauren then begins saying that she believes that there will be many more "economic colonies" like Olivar, and Joanne accuses her of always having "a disaster up your sleeve." However, the girls eventually apologize, hug, and admit that they will miss each other.

The conflict between Lauren and Joanne has left them each feeling both accusatory and defensive. Lauren no longer feels that she can trust Joanne enough to be honest with her, and thus lies about her plans for the future. However, despite the conflict between them, both girls remain affectionate toward one another. Just as Lauren was able to look past Keith's immoral behavior in order to love him as her brother, so can she see that despite Joanne's betrayal, she still loves her as an old friend.

A few days later Lauren's father fails to come home from work. Lauren joins a search party that rides out to the college on bicycles; she brings a gun, and Marcus brings a knife. They don't find anything, and resolve to go into the hills the next day. At first they also don't find anything there. Then they discover a black man's arm that has been cut off with a knife. Marcus throws up, but Lauren inspects it carefully; however, it is too difficult to determine whether it could belong to her father. Suddenly they hear a man's voice screaming and begging. The noise eventually stops, and Lauren hopes that the man is dead and out of his misery. They go home, having found nothing.

Lauren and Marcus's differing reactions to the discovery of the man's arm highlight the extent of Lauren's stoic disposition. While some characters, such as Keith, have argued that Lauren would not be able to survive in the outside world due to her hyperempathy, in actuality Lauren is far tougher than almost anyone she knows. Even when investigating a body part that may belong to her beloved father, she maintains an unfazed, clinical attitude.

Five days later there is still no sign of Lauren's father. The adults have stopped looking, and the police could not find anything, although they did determine that the dead arm's fingerprints did not belong to him. The search party encountered hundreds of dead bodies and even a child being eaten alive by dogs. They killed the dogs, but the child died anyway. Lauren speaks at the Sunday church service, feeling like it is her responsibility to do so. She reads Luke 18:1-8, a story about a persistent widow who is determined to bring about justice. Lauren reflects that the community survived under her father's leadership, and they will have to keep surviving even if he is dead. Curtis's sister begins to sing "We Shall Not Be Moved," a civil rights anthem that began as an African-American spiritual. After, she congratulates Lauren on her sermon, telling her that her father would be proud.

Even though she is still only a child, Lauren is not permitted any time to recover from the shock or grief of losing her father. This is in part due to the harsh reality of the world in which she lives, where violence and death are an ordinary part of life. However, it is also because Lauren appears to be the natural successor to her father's role as a leader in the community. Instead of seeking comfort from others in the wake of her father's disappearance, she sees it as her role to provide comfort to the neighborhood. Yet rather than being a denial of her own grief, perhaps this is the best way for Lauren to process her feelings—by filling a role that would make her father proud.

CHAPTER 13

Lauren's father's funeral takes place even though his family still doesn't know what happened to him. However, they are sure he must be dead, because otherwise he would find a way to come home. Lauren writes that this uncertainty makes it worse than Keith's death. She tells herself that her father must be dead—"that's that." Two days later, an armed truck comes to collect the Garfields and take them to Olivar. Some of the children in the neighborhood have never seen a working truck. One of the KSF workers is black, and Cory talks to him about Olivar. Without Reverend Olamina's salary it is clear that the family must do something, but Lauren feels there is no way they will be accepted to go and live in Olivar.

In multiple ways, this is a moment of irrecoverable loss for the community. Not only has Lauren's father presumably died, but the Garfields are also leaving, likely never to be seen again. The fact that Cory remains invested in the idea of moving to Olivar emphasizes how different her vision of the future is to that of Lauren. Without Lauren's father to bind them together, will the family continue to function as a unit in the future?

After the Garfields leave, Lauren and Curtis have sex and discuss their future. Curtis suggests that they get married and leave the neighborhood together. They realize that they have both privately been thinking about going north without telling each other. Lauren feels excited about this, but guilty about the prospect of leaving Cory and her brothers. She admits that she hadn't mentioned her plan to leave because she knew it would be too dangerous to ask anyone to accompany her. Curtis asks Lauren to marry him now, but she refuses. She knows she needs to tell him about Earthseed eventually. She promises him that after her family is "back on its feet" they can get married and leave.

Although Lauren has been acting like an adult for a number of years, this passage highlights the fact that she is now truly on the precipice of adulthood. A future traveling north with Curtis would mean leading an independent life and perhaps starting a family of her own, while also leaving her birth family in the neighborhood (or, perhaps, in Olivar). However, although she and Curtis are very close, Lauren has thus far hidden the most important aspects of her life and thoughts from him.

A few days later, someone sets fire to the Payne-Parrish house. While neighborhood residents try to put the fire out, three more houses are robbed, including Lauren's house. Lauren says that people set fires because it helps them commit theft, because they are desperate, and also because of the increasing popularity of pyro, the drug that makes watching fire "a better, more intense, longer-lasting high than sex." Lauren is woken up by an alarm at 2 am; she runs outside to find the Payne-Parrish house burning. Someone has called the fire department, but all the Paynes are missing. Just as the fire is dying down, the alarm goes off again, and Harry Balter's mother starts screaming that there are intruders robbing the houses.

Either the neighborhood has become less secure, or the world outside is getting more violent (or both)—regardless, it seems likely that Lauren's community will not be able to hold out much longer. Note the timing of when Lauren mentions the fact that pyro makes starting fires better than sex—this takes place soon after she and Curtis have sex, and is thus a reminder that even as they dream of creating a better life for themselves (and perhaps even having a family), people around them are hell-bent on total destruction, and even find joy in it.

Fortunately, the community manages to scare the thieves away, and Lauren is relieved to find they didn't discover all of the money hidden in her house. However, they have taken Cory's sewing machine, which will cause difficulty for the family. Curtis comes to the window and says that the burnt bodies of the Payne family were found inside the house. Even though Lauren doesn't like Wardell (who survived), she feels sorry for him, as he is lost his house and his whole family.

After this series of tragic events befalls the neighborhood, Lauren and Cory must try to adapt yet again and keep going with their lives.

A few days later, Lauren writes that Cory has pleaded her way into taking over part of Lauren's father's job at the college. This means that Cory will have to go outside, and she has already started recruiting men to escort her. Lauren, meanwhile, will take over the neighborhood school. Wardell stays at the Olaminas' for a week, behaving nonsensically and refusing to eat anything. Eventually, he demands to go home, saying: "I hate it here; everyone's dead!" Lauren suspects that Wardell will not live long himself.

In the end, it is Wardell who—in his state of shock and grief—actually speaks the truth of what has taken place and how he feels about it. Lauren interprets Wardell's words as indicating that he will not live long either, which in turn suggests that the only way to survive the total loss and devastation that the characters are forced to deal with is to block it out of one's mind.

CHAPTER 14

It is 7 months later, July 2027. Lauren awakes in the middle of the night to the smell of burning; she grabs her pack and yells at Cory and the boys to run. Intruders have driven a truck through the neighborhood gate. Lauren believes they are pyro addicts; they are bald, with skin painted in bright colors. Lauren falls to the ground and Cory and her brothers run ahead of her. She sees dead bodies everywhere, grabs her pack, and keeps running. As people are shot around her, Lauren is crippled by their pain. She manages to get out of the neighborhood and stays crouched in the darkness, careful not to make a sound. She wonders if Cory has her gun, and wishes that she had it herself. Lauren walks toward the hills, terrified. There she finds an old, burned out house and hides in the garage until morning.

The dramatic opening to this chapter marks a major turning point in the plot. While the intrusion of pyro addicts may seem shocking, there have been many clues building up to this moment. Just as Lauren once predicted to Joanne, the neighborhood gate has been destroyed, annihilating any last semblance of security and normalcy. Indeed, Lauren's prediction that an event like this would take place allows her to react quickly, escape the chaos, and hide out in a relatively safe place. However, just as she was alone in preparing for disaster, so is she alone in her escape.

In the morning, Lauren wakes up and knows she must go home, but is reluctant to do so. That evening, she starts a new diary entry. She feels "dazed" and wants to run away, but forces herself to write. All the houses in the neighborhood have been burned. There are strangers picking through them who Lauren doesn't recognize. The floor is strewn with ash-covered bodies. Lauren peers at the body of a bald, green-faced woman, and another person wearing Cory's shoes tells her to leave the body alone, saying: "She died for us." Lauren wants to kill that person. Lauren goes into her own bedroom, which is completely destroyed. She quickly bundles together clothes from her father's room, taking other items such as dental floss, soap, and petroleum jelly. She also finds at least one outfit each for Cory and her brothers, including shoes.

Overnight, Lauren's neighborhood has been transformed from a place of comfort, community, and solidarity into a wasteland populated by strangers scavenging their way through the ruins. The fact that Lauren sees a woman wearing Cory's shoes does not bode well for the fate of Cory and Lauren's brothers, but for now Lauren remains naïvely hopeful that her family have survived and that she will be able to reunite with them. Note that Lauren must pose as a scavenger in order to keep safe among the others, and therefore must once again suppress her true feelings about what has happened.

Outside, the garden that Cory so carefully tended has been destroyed. Lauren grabs the few vegetables she can and shakes lemons from the tree. She also manages to snatch the money packet buried in the ground and quickly hides it among her other items, which are stuffed inside a pillowcase. Leaving her house, Lauren sees Richard Moss lying dead and naked in a pool of blood. She sees other neighbors also lying dead, old people and children alike, and girls who have been raped before being killed, one who was only 8. She sees Michael Talcott's body and hopes that Curtis is still alive. She is desperate to find her family.

The brutality with which the neighborhood has been destroyed and its residents massacred is a distinct contrast to the garden Cory devotedly grew and the careful precision with which Lauren's family hid their money and emergency supplies. People like Lauren's family try their best to create and sustain lives in the midst of total chaos and destruction—yet is this endeavor always doomed to fail?

Someone calls Lauren's name, and she turns around to see Zahra Moss, Richard's youngest wife, and Harry Balter. They are clinging to each other and are both covered in blood. Zahra says that "everyone's dead," but Harry says there must be some other survivors. Lauren asks if they've seen her family, and Zahra says that—like her daughter—they are all dead. Zahra explains in broken sentences that while a man held her down and raped her, she saw Lauren's family being killed. The three of them sit for a long time, talking, before eventually getting up and walking toward Lauren's garage. On the way, Harry collapses and throws up. Zahra explains that he helped her escape from the man who was raping her, but that he was badly beaten as a result.

Lauren's encounter with Zahra and Harry is bittersweet. The fact that at least some members of the neighborhood survived is reassuring, as there remains an automatic sense of solidarity and mutual support between the three of them that clearly does not exist in the bleak wilderness of the outside world. However, this sense of hope is tarnished by the fact that Zahra reveals that Lauren's family are dead. On the other hand, at least Lauren can be certain of their fate, and won't face the uncertainty that characterized her father's disappearance.

CHAPTER 15

Harry has a concussion and sleeps most of the next day. Lauren is grateful for the distraction of looking after him and talking with Zahra, who periodically burst into tears over the loss of her little daughter. Zahra explains that she and Harry hadn't really known each other before he saved her. Without thinking, Lauren mentions that Richard is dead, which she knows because she saw his body. Zahra breaks down again, and Lauren apologizes, feeling guilty about her bluntness. When Zahra stops crying, she explains to Lauren and Harry that Richard bought her from her mother when she was 15 and homeless. Although Richard's other wives were cruel to her, Zahra at least had security and enough food to eat in the Moss house.

This passage further emphasizes the difference between Lauren's method of coping with trauma and that of those around her—especially Zahra. Although Lauren has also just lost her entire family and community, she is unthinkingly blunt about revealing Richard's death to Zahra, who is far more openly emotional about the tragedy that has befallen them. Lauren, meanwhile, processes her trauma through care and support of a new, smaller "family" she is forming with Harry and Zahra.

Lauren points out that if Harry goes to Olivar the Garfields will take him in, but Harry refuses, saying that there is no future there. Zahra says it would be better than starving. Lauren explains that she is going to head north, and Harry says he will do the same. Lauren then gently mentions that she saw the bodies of some of Harry's relatives, including the little kids. Harry is in shock, but he does not cry.

None of the three characters can afford to spend much time dwelling in their grief—their only choice is to look to the future and explore possible methods of survival. Promisingly, Harry seems to share many of Lauren's attitudes, refusing to invest hope in what he perceives to be the false salvation of Olivar. Zahra is more open to handing over her freedom to others in exchange for security, as she once did to Richard Moss.

A little while later, Zahra brings them some peaches, and Lauren gives her the clothes she'd taken for her family to wear. Zahra says she will be able to trade the younger boys' shoes for some food. Harry and Lauren agree to travel together, and Lauren says she will pretend to be a man. Zahra sneers at this, saying that interracial couples always cause trouble in the outside world, whether they're gay or straight. Lauren offers that if Zahra comes along, the two of them can pretend to be a couple, and Harry their friend. Zahra agrees and starts to then cry.

It is significant that where Harry and Lauren were born in the relative comfort and safety of the neighborhood, Zahra spent the beginning of her life homeless before being sold to Richard. She is more fearful of life in the outside world because she has direct experience of it.

Harry expresses surprise at Lauren's indifference over the fact that Zahra stole the peaches she brought them, considering Lauren's Christian upbringing. This angers Lauren, who replies: "I mean to survive." Zahra warns Harry and Lauren that they know little about how to survive in the outside world, but Lauren insists that she will learn by observation. The next day, Zahra takes them to a large, secure mall, which is one of the safest places in the area. Each of the three go in separately while the others guard their belongings outside, and a security guard asks to see Lauren's money before allowing her in. Lauren buys food, water purification tablets, and outdoor necessities such as sunblock. She also gets toilet paper, tampons, a new notebook, pens, ammunition for her gun, sleepsacks, and large, cheap-looking jackets.

This passage continues to explore the question of whether Lauren is truly prepared for life in the outside world, or whether she is simply sheltered and naïve. To a certain extent, Harry and Zahra have a mistaken view of Lauren, assuming that because she is the daughter of a preacher she will be rigidly faithful to Christian morality in the face of the harsh demands of survival. The list of Lauren's purchases at the mall suggests that she is arguably more prepared and capable of survival than Harry and Zahra might presume.

After leaving the mall they walk up the freeway, eventually getting to the 101, which goes up the coast to Oregon. There are many other people walking alongside them, as well as "swarms" of bikes and the occasional truck or car. Most people carry weapons of some kind, and almost everyone is filthy and smelly. There are a few young men around who remind Lauren of Keith; she watches them warily. She keeps her gun loaded and half-hidden in its holster. Lauren knows she needs to tell Zahra and Harry about her hyperempathy, but wants to wait until they trust each other more.

Lauren may have never spent much time in the outside world, but her experiences within the confines of the neighborhood have prepared her to some extent for the situation she now finds herself in. For example, the fact that there are young men who remind her of Keith alerts her to be wary. Her love for Keith in no way clouds her judgment that these young men are a threat to be avoided at all costs.

CHAPTER 16

Lauren soon learns that "walking hurts." Zahra advises the others to suck on the pip of a fruit to stave off thirst, admitting that as a child she would sometimes even suck on rocks. People build campfires even though it is illegal, and Lauren, Harry, and Zahra cook their food on a small fire. While they eat, others wander over and ask for food; one woman offers herself to Lauren (who is in disguise as a man) and Harry, and an old man pleads to use a little fire to cook a single, "withered" potato. They agree, but watch him carefully.

The outside world is governed by animalistic instincts, fears, and desires. Every choice people make is grounded in their need to survive at whatever cost. This makes it unwise to trust almost anyone the characters meet on the road—even people as seemingly harmless as the elderly man.

Zahra reminds them that "nobody's safe," and that even little children will rob people, as she once did. They have already witnessed a man being robbed of everything as he walked. Harry is resistant to the harsh and selfish attitude Lauren and Zahra espouse, which leads Lauren to wonder if they should go on without him. She also notices that Harry is looking flirtatiously at Zahra, who is very beautiful, and worries that this will cause trouble during their journey.

Lauren and Zahra are easily able to slip into a survivalist mode of thinking, but Harry is more resistant. He cleaves to the moral code he learned growing up in the neighborhood—but this code is simply not compatible with life beyond the neighborhood gate. However, even Harry cannot fully shake his more animalistic impulses—such as his apparent desire for Zahra.

At that moment, two large men walk over, and one of them smiles at Zahra. Lauren flashes her gun at them and they quickly back off. The trio plan to do the overnight watch in three-hour shifts, with Lauren going first. Harry gives Lauren his wristwatch, a gift from his mother. Zahra asks Lauren to teach her to read and write, explaining that back in the neighborhood Richard didn't allow her to learn. Lauren promises they can start lessons in the morning. They admit that they didn't used to like each other, but now they do. Zahra remarks that Lauren seems to have anticipated and prepared for the disaster that struck the neighborhood, but Lauren replies that she simply "thought something would happen someday."

To some extent, the neighborhood is presented as a place of inclusivity and mutual support. However, Lauren and Zahra's evolving friendship demonstrates that there were also sharp divisions between the residents of their old community. It is only when they have moved beyond the confines of the neighborhood that they are able to realize how similar they are to one another and to develop a close relationship—as well as enjoy other freedoms, which in Zahra's case includes learning to read and write.

Lauren's time keeping watch is exhausting and terrifying. She hears people and gunfire in the distance, but fortunately no one approaches her. After handing over to Harry, she falls asleep immediately, but awakes again to the sound of gunshots nearby. Suddenly, a dead man's body falls onto her. She sees Harry wrestling with another man who is trying to take his gun. Lauren takes a rock and brings it down onto the man's head; she is knocked down by his pain. Harry and Zahra rush to check on her, and they discover that the injured man is somehow still alive, although unconscious. His skull has caved in, and Lauren realizes that she must kill him. Harry is resistant to giving her the gun, saying that the man might survive, but Lauren says without medical care he will only suffer before eventually dying.

This scene confirms the fact that Lauren is in even greater danger in the outside world than Harry or Zahra are because of her hyperempathy. At the same time, Lauren defies Keith's prediction that she would be weakened by her hyperempathy to the point of not being able to survive. In actual fact, Lauren's condition often makes her behave in an even more fierce and ruthless manner than she otherwise would. She cannot survive around people in mortal pain, and thus has no choice but to kill the man she has injured.

Unable to get the gun from Harry, Lauren retrieves a knife from her pack and slits the man's throat. She tells Harry and Zahra to strip the two dead bodies and take anything useful. She takes food and money from the pockets of one of the men, but leaves behind a packet of purple pills. Lauren and Zahra move the bodies and cover them with dirt, then decide to move their camp. Lauren is worried that Harry and Zahra will no longer want to travel with her after seeing her kill the man, so she decides to tell them about her mother and hyperempathy. Harry remains standoffish, telling Lauren that he would not have killed the man; Lauren tells him that she would not have asked him to. Zahra admits that her mother also took drugs and that most of the babies where she came from were born with drug-related abnormalities.

Somewhat ironically, Harry's strict sense of morality prevents him from empathizing with Lauren. The fact that Zahra is better able to understand Lauren's reasoning highlights the fact that Harry's moral rigidity emerges from his (relatively) privileged background. Zahra, whose difficult past has led her to be more aware of the dark realities of the world, understands that Lauren is not to blame for the condition she was born with—nor for the steps she must take to protect herself and survive.

Zahra and Lauren hug, and Lauren wonders why they had not been friends back in the neighborhood. Lauren assures Harry that she wouldn't kill someone who had a non-life-threatening injury. She takes his hands and promises that she won't "betray" him. She explains that her father taught her to hide her hyperempathy as an act of self-defense. Harry admits that he feels as if Lauren is "a lie," and asks to read or hear something that reveals the truth about her. After some hesitation, Lauren shows him the first lines of Earthseed scripture: "All that You touch / You change, / All that you Change / Changes you… God is Change." Lauren notes that these lines say "everything."

This passage represents a significant turning point in Lauren's relationship with Harry and Zahra. Lauren is extremely secretive about Earthseed, particularly after her conversation with Joanne. Even though Lauren never told Joanne about Earthseed, simply revealing her thoughts about life and the future triggered a hostile, panicked reaction in her friend. Lauren then takes a large risk by explaining Earthseed to Harry and Zahra; it is not yet clear whether this will pay off.

CHAPTER 17

As Lauren, Harry, and Zahra keep walking, they see an enormous fire, perhaps a whole other neighborhood set alight. Some of the people walking along the freeway make a diversion in order to scavenge from the site of the fire, and Zahra asks the others if they should join them. Harry refuses, saying that this is theft, and Lauren points out that the fire is far away and will not be cool enough yet. Zahra confesses that she cried when she first saw the fire, because it reminded her of the neighborhood and her dead daughter, and the hatred she feels for people who set fires. Later, Harry suggests that they move in order to keep an eye on the fire and make sure it doesn't spread toward them. Lauren knows that Harry is still upset about the death of the man the day before; at the same time, the Earthseed scripture she shared had cheered him.

The opening of Chapter 17 serves as a reminder that what happened to Lauren's neighborhood was hardly a unique situation. Everywhere they go, the characters are surrounded by destruction. Because of this, they are forced to relive the trauma of seeing their entire families and lives burn to the ground. At the same time, they are now in the position of the strangers who descended on the neighborhood after the fire—scavengers who must turn every tragedy into an opportunity to help themselves survive.

Yet despite his interest in Lauren's writing, Harry remains distrustful of the "new" Lauren. Zahra, on the other hand, is not troubled by seeing this new side of Lauren, perhaps because she didn't know her that well to begin with. The three of them move camp, and that night Lauren wakes up to the sound of Harry and Zahra having sex. Lauren feels their pleasure as a result of her hyperempathy, but afterward is angry that they did such a thing while Harry was supposed to be on watch. She hears Harry snoring and shakes him awake, asking him to give her the gun so she can take over. Harry apologizes and says he must have fallen asleep by accident. Lauren says that if he cares about Zahra and wants to protect her, he cannot afford to be so careless.

There is little room for privacy in Lauren, Harry, and Zahra's life on the road. Lauren does not hesitate about making it clear that she knows Harry and Zahra had sex; their collective safety is far more important than any notion of politeness when it comes to this matter. Of course, there is an even more extreme way in which Lauren (unintentionally) violates Harry and Zahra's privacy—by actually feeling their pleasure while they have sex. This emphasizes the fact that Lauren really has no power to give Harry and Zahra privacy even if she wanted to.

Back on the road, the trio stop at a commercial water station. These stations are the only places that supply reliably clean water; however, they are also dangerous spaces where robberies often take place. As Lauren and Harry approach the station, they intervene in an attempted robbery of a young family—two parents and their baby. The husband tells Lauren, "Thanks man," which surprises her, even though at this point she has been in drag for some time. The family are interracial—the husband is black and the wife is Latina—and this is part of what moves Lauren to help them. Earlier that morning, when she and Zahra were in the middle of a literacy lesson, Lauren mentioned to Zahra that she was happy to give her and Harry privacy, but that they shouldn't neglect their watch. Zahra promises to be more careful next time. Lauren admits that the prospect of pregnancy is enough to put her off sex, but Zahra responds: "If it happens, it happens." Meanwhile the interracial family keeps traveling near Lauren and the others, and she wonders if they could turn out to be "allies."

This passage contains two different examples of times at which the characters must calculate a risk-benefit analysis. In the case of the interracial family, Lauren believes that the family could become "allies" who could help Lauren and the others stay safe on the road. However, as the characters have emphasized multiple times, it's dangerous to trust any stranger—even those who appear friendly or harmless. Meanwhile, Zahra also weighs the risk of getting pregnant against her desire to have sex with Harry. For Lauren, the prospect of having children is far more alarming than it is for Zahra. It is clear that Zahra has grown up with the mindset that the risk of getting pregnant is simply an inevitable part of life, rather then something that can be avoided.

The trio reach the ocean, which none of them has ever seen before. Harry goes for a swim, but Lauren and Zahra don't. Lauren notes that there seems to be little violence and crime on the beach, and wonders if the water soothes people. They set up camp nearby, and Lauren begins to construct a water filtration system in the sand. At night, Lauren and Zahra wash in the sea. Afterward, Lauren tries the water she has filtered, despite Harry's warnings that it must be dirty. The water tastes "brackish," but not salty. Lauren reasons that if she boils it or adds a water purification tablet, it will be safe to drink. The interracial family has camped nearby, and Lauren asks Harry and Zahra if they would mind if she invited them over. Harry is a little resistant, but they both agree. When Lauren asks, the man is suspicious. Lauren returns to Harry and Zahra and says she believes the family will join them after some time.

Water is not only practically important to the characters in the novel, but also important on a symbolic level. In a world in which water scarcity has had a devastating impact on the structure of society and in which fires routinely destroy people's homes and lives, water itself comes to symbolize peace, endurance, and nourishment. It is significant that none of the three characters have ever seen the ocean before; this emphasizes the fact that their lives have been characterized by scarcity and destruction. There are hints that this first encounter with the ocean may mark a turning point in each of their lives.

The next day, the family does not join them. Lauren sees another group of people have their supplies taken by a pack of dogs, which makes her nervous. She then sees the dogs approaching the family; when one dog comes near the baby, she shoots it, scaring the other dogs away. Later on, the family comes to join Lauren, Harry, and Zahra. The man's name is Travis, the woman is Natividad, and their son is called Dominic (or Domingo). They offer milk chocolate, a rare treat. Lauren asks if the baby is all right, and Travis proudly says that he "hardly ever cries." Natividad explains that they are heading to Seattle, where Travis has an aunt. They hope to find jobs that will pay in money. Lauren feels "alone between the two couples," and begins to write in her notebook. Natividad expresses surprise that she can read and write.

Once again, Lauren's instincts are proven correct—although she has also had to be rather proactive in order to make that the case. After Lauren risks her own safety in order to help Travis and Natividad twice, they are finally convinced that they can trust her. While the group has expanded to include more people, Lauren simultaneously feels lonelier within this new dynamic. While inclusivity is useful for survival, it does not always provide a sense of reassurance; instead, it can sometimes feel alienating.

Harry accidentally refers to Lauren as "she," and Lauren is forced to admit that she is in fact female. Lauren tells Travis and Natividad that they are "natural allies." Although Travis insists that he can take care of his family, he confesses that he wishes they had guns like Lauren's group. Natividad asks to hear some of Lauren's writing, explaining that the rich woman she used to work for as a maid would sometimes read to her. Lauren reads from Earthseed, choosing passages that are not too "preachy."

Travis maintains a sense of pride that prevents him from seeing the truth; no matter how hard he tries to protect his family, they will inevitably face threats that he cannot overcome alone. The end of the chapter suggests that Lauren's dream of forming an Earthseed community may be beginning to take shape in reality.

CHAPTER 18

The scripture that opens Chapter 18 advocates a weekly "Gathering of Earthseed." It is Sunday, and the traveling group is resting on a new beach in Santa Barbara County. Lauren is surprised to find that some of the local people on the beach are willing to talk to her. They discuss pyro and the problem of people setting fires. No one Lauren speaks to knows of any jobs that pay in real money. The day before, the group had stocked up on supplies at a shopping complex. They paid to do laundry, a "luxury" they can only afford to do every so often. They had hoped that the water would be cheaper further north, but so far the opposite is true.

The group is beginning to invent a new way of life together, albeit one defined by the uncertainty and struggle of being on the road.

Back on the beach, Travis questions Lauren about how she can really believe in Earthseed, when she "made it up." Lauren responds that Earthseed comes from her observations and analysis of the world around her. She says she was "looking for God," and what she found was change.

Travis' question shows that he does not yet fully understand that Earthseed is less a web of intricate and mystical rules (as is the case for most other religions), but rather a more basic and abstract set of principles around which Lauren is already guiding the group. It is also possible that Travis is surprised by Lauren's certainty in the truth of Earthseed given that she is a very young woman with relatively little experience of the world.

Harry joins the conversation. Travis discusses the physical law of entropy, which surprises Lauren; Travis explains that his mother had been a journalist and that she taught him to read and write. After Travis's mother was forced to become a cook, Travis would secretly read the books from the library of his mother's rich employer. Lauren reflects that this story is reminiscent of slavery, when enslaved people risked death in order to educate themselves.

The America of 2027 may look very different to the country that readers know today, but the issues depicted in the novel have a strong connection to the real history of the nation. As slaveholders once knew, literacy is a powerful skill that enables people to be able to understand the world around them—including the injustices to which they are subjected. (Indeed, there is perhaps no better evidence of the power of literacy than Lauren's life.) It was for this reason that enslaved people were not allowed to read, and why Travis, Zahra, and others are again prevented from doing so.

Travis continues, saying that after his mother died, he and Natividad worked for the same employer; however, this man soon began making sexual advances at Natividad. The man's wife then helped Travis and Natividad to escape. Lauren notes that no such help existed during slavery. Travis says he can't view entropy as God because "nobody's going to worship" change. However, Lauren points out that Earthseed isn't about worshipping God.

In Butler's dark vision of the future, the darkest parts of America's past are repeated. Here she emphasizes the sexual abuse that was such a large part of the institution of slavery. Lauren also makes an important distinction about Earthseed here—it declares that God is change, but doesn't require its followers to actually worship *God; just accept the truth.*

Travis points out that prayer consoles people. Lauren replies that there is hope to be found in acknowledging the truth of the universe and trying to "shape" God. Harry shouts: "Amen!" They have dinner, and Lauren reflects that it has been a good day. Harry has bought his own notebook to write in, and is helping with Zahra's literacy lessons. Lauren even decides to tell Travis about Earthseed's "Destiny." Travis points out that Lauren's God doesn't give people the hope of heaven, but Lauren replies that Earthseed does promise heaven. She adds: "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." She explains that Earthseed's purpose is to colonize other planets. Travis says that she's "crazy," but seems intrigued. Lauren admits that it will be a long time before Earthseed could actually travel to space, but the task now is to begin preparations. Travis keeps listening and asking questions, which Lauren appreciates.

Lauren does not expect people to convert to Earthseed (or even to understand it) straight away. However, she appreciates Travis' curiosity and willingness to listen to her. The respect Travis shows her is exactly what she spent her teenage years craving. The fact that Lauren has already told Travis about Earthseed's "Destiny" despite having known him for a short period of time demonstrates her trust in him and the possibility that the community she always dreamed of forming is beginning to become a reality. While the group still faces the enormous challenge of simply surviving each day, some of them are at least now able to find hope and strength in Lauren's vision of the future.

A week later, Lauren writes that she thinks Travis is her first convert, and Zahra is the second. Zahra isn't interested in the outer space mission of Earthseed, but likes the idea of choosing a different way of life on Earth. Lauren thinks that she should begin keeping an eye out for new converts among the people walking north. The newly-formed community could then find a piece of land on which to live. The more people, the safer that community would be.

Like other religions, Earthseed has different meanings for different people. Lauren does not worry about the fact that not all of Earthseed's principles appeals to each of her new converts. The most important thing is that Earthseed shows a way forward in a world defined by chaos, uncertainty, and destruction.

CHAPTER 19

Days later, there is an earthquake. The people walking along the freeway scream, and some fall. Lauren helps an old man who has fallen to the ground, and then sees another older man smiling at her. He is black, and Lauren likes his smile, so she smiles back. Meanwhile, Harry has found a scrunched up rag containing rolls of cash. Lauren tells him to buy a gun with it. The group all survive the earthquake unharmed, but soon Travis spots a large fire in the distance. They begin walking away from the fire, but then hear gunshots. Suddenly, Lauren sees the same older black man from before; she notes that he is handsome. They begin talking, and Lauren makes a point of showing off her intelligence. The man walks alongside Lauren's group and introduces himself as Taylor Franklin Bankole.

Perhaps as a result of the fact that she is now traveling as part of a newly-formed community, Lauren is more willing to trust strangers than when she first set out on the road. Her interest in Bankole is also clearly rooted in the fact that she finds him attractive. On one level, this seems like a dangerous and irresponsible way of deciding whether or not to trust someone. At the same time, however, Lauren's instincts about people have been reliable so far. Is she pushing her luck, or making choices based on her skill at reading people's personalities?

Lauren and Bankole discuss the fact that their relatives both changed their surnames to Yoruba names during the Black Liberation movement of the 1960s. Bankole is 57, one year older than Lauren's father. While they are talking, Bankole hears shouts from inside a semi-collapsed house. They approach cautiously, and manage to pull two women from the rubble. Lauren can feel their wounds and wants to leave, but stays to assure the women that they are all right and to help them walk again. The women are both white and in their twenties; their names are Allie and Jill, and Lauren guesses they could be sisters.

Lauren may have decided to trust Bankole, but this does not mean she is willing to welcome just anyone she meets on the road into her life. Although Allie and Jill are in an extremely vulnerable position and have good cause to behave kindly to Lauren and her group, this is not enough to compel Lauren to trust them, and she makes sure to keep them at arm's length. It's also possible that part of the reason for her distrust is that, unlike Bankole, they are white.

Suddenly a man grabs Zahra, and seconds later another grabs Lauren. Lauren manages to stab her attacker, and kills him; she has never been in more pain in her life. She opens her eyes to see Harry and Bankole staring at her with concern. Harry tells her that the group are all right, and that the four attackers are all dead. They take clothes, money, two knives, a gun, and a radio from the corpses. They also find a box of pills, which they leave behind. The two women they'd saved from the collapsed house, Allie and Jill, want to join the group. They are on the run from their father, who pimped them out as prostitutes. When Jill asks, "Who are you guys, anyway?", Harry replies, "Earthseed." Lauren explains that they are traveling north in order to found a community, and Allie asks if they are a cult, adding: "Religion is dog shit." Lauren reminds her that no one is forcing her to join them.

Allie and Jill are the first people to express direct hostility to Earthseed upon learning about it. Although belief in Earthseed is not required in order for people to join Lauren's group, the derision with which Allie reacts to Earthseed suggests that she may be a liability to the newly-formed community. On the other hand, Allie and Jill's traumatic life story perhaps explains why they react in such a negative manner to learning that the group practice a kind of religion. With all that has happened to them, who can blame them for reacting to Earthseed in a bitter, cynical manner?

Allie remains somewhat hostile, but agrees to travel with the group and to help and support them. Lauren welcomes her. She talks to Bankole, and reflects that she likes him "too much" and needs to be cautious. Later that day they reach Salinas, a city that is surprisingly free of destruction and scavengers. There is a large police presence, and heavily-armed security guards at the stores. The guards are aggressive, pointing their guns at the group and telling them to "buy something or get out." However, the guards at the water station are more "calm and professional," enabling the group to restock on water and even have a quick wash. Lauren purchases condoms and books, and Bankole spots an antique rifle that he wants the group to collectively buy. There is a debate over whether the purchase is worth it, but they eventually agree to buy it and practice shooting together.

The group is beginning to function less like a haphazard assemblage of stragglers and more like a real, productive community. The strength of their collective presence and resources allows them to do things such as take turns washing or buy the antique gun. While living in a large group inevitably creates certain issues, it is clear that the characters have a better chance of survival now that they are traveling as part of a community. In a chaotic and dangerous world, developing structures of shared responsibility and mutual support is vital to existence.

CHAPTER 20

The group decides to skip their usual rest day. Lauren listens to the radio, which advises people to stay away from the Bay Area. The whole region was badly damaged by the earthquake, and is now being further destroyed by scavengers, police, and pyro addicts. Lauren adds that "the rich are flying out in helicopters."

This passage serves as a reminder that the United States is not simply in a constant state of chaos; rather, the social and political situation is in a continual process of change. This is also one of the first times that Lauren explicitly mentions the fact that rich people have the ability to evacuate certain parts of the country if need be. The notion of escaping in a helicopter is, of course, very far from the reality facing Lauren and her group.

The group get out their maps and plan a new route. Lauren warns some women traveling alone with children to avoid the Bay Area, but they simply back away from her, looking frightened. The group are all exhausted, but they know that they cannot take a rest day yet. Early the next morning, Lauren awakes to the sound of gunfire. She hisses at the people sleeping next to her to be still and wait for it to pass. In the distance, they can see two groups of people shooting at one another and a large structure on fire, which Lauren realizes must be a truck. She concludes that they are witnessing a hijacking that went wrong.

Lauren and the others do not have the privilege of simply being able to fly away from the destruction around them. Instead, they find themselves trapped between pyro addicts, hijackers, scavengers, and other desperate, destructive people, all of whom are forced to make their way through the country on foot.

Lauren reaches for Bankole, but he is not there. She can't see him, but lies still while the shooting continues. Suddenly the truck explodes, which ends the gunfire and scatters the two groups of people. Lauren checks on everyone; they are all fine, but there is no sign of Bankole. Lauren sets out to look for him, and Harry joins her. They are frightened by sounds in the darkness, when suddenly Bankole emerges, leaving Lauren "almost limp with relief." Bankole is carrying a child who, he explains, has just been orphaned. The child is a boy of about three; he cries loudly for his dead mother, which makes Lauren nervous. Natividad takes the boy and nurses him at one breast, with Dominic at the other.

Both Lauren and Bankole exhibit the same sense of kindness and connection to others. Although this unites them and brings them closer as couple, it also endangers them within the harsh and unpredictable environment in which they have found themselves. Families and young children also play a large role in this narrative, unlike in many post-apocalyptic tales, and the scene of Natividad nursing two babies at once offers an image of fertility and hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

Lauren begins her watch along with Allie, telling the rest of the group that she will wake them at dawn. Bankole joins Lauren and they kiss. Lauren would like to have sex with him, but knows she must focus on keeping watch. Bankole thanks her for going to look for him earlier. They agree to talk soon, and Bankole goes to sleep.

Lauren has become notably more sensitive since meeting Bankole, no longer exuding the tough persona she once did. She is also tempted by the distraction of having sex with him during her watch, a mistake for which she already harshly scolded Harry. While Lauren remains the same fierce, pragmatic person, her relationship with Bankole has provided a wholly new and different element to her life on the road. The relationship may bring them pleasure, but it could also spell danger.

The little boy Bankole rescued is named Justin. Justin's mother had been carrying his birth certificate, along with other important documents and several thousand dollars. Justin warms to Allie, who is at first hostile toward him. Jill explains that Allie previously had a baby called Adam, but that their father killed him when he was only a few months old. It was at this point that Allie and Jill decided to burn down their father's house and run away. Jill confesses that she is haunted by the thought that her father didn't die in the fire and will one day find her. Lauren observes that taking care of other people can be a cure for "nightmares." Later that day, the group stops to purchase more supplies at a town called Hollister. Lauren is surprised to see that rather than wreaking havoc in the aftermath of the earthquake, the residents of Hollister are helping one another.

This passage further explores the idea that in an apocalyptic environment, care for others can be both a curse and a salvation. Looking after children in particular gives a sense of purpose and meaning to the chaotic, traumatic lives of the adults. On the other hand, the loss of a child—which is, tragically, not an unlikely occurrence in this world—is a nightmare from which many cannot recover. Indeed, the pain and difficulty inherent within caring for other people means that many characters in the novel choose only to look out for themselves and perhaps only one or two select others. At the same time, the sight of people in Hollister helping one another provides a sense of hope for the future.

CHAPTER 21

The group arrives at the San Luis Reservoir, a lake that hasn't yet totally dried up. There are a lot of people camping around the lake, some of them permanently. Several groups have set up small gardens where they are growing vegetables. The people living by the lake seem wary of Lauren's group, but there is no confrontation. The group chooses a spot far away from the other camps and settles in. While Lauren is cleaning her gun, Harry comes over and mentions that he knows about what's happening between her and Bankole. Later, Lauren and Bankole split off from the group to spend time alone. Lauren tells him about Earthseed, and Bankole observes that there are similarities between Earthseed and Buddhism. Lauren agrees, but emphasizes that Earthseed is its own, distinct belief system.

The beginning of this chapter emphasizes the theme of new beginnings, particularly through the symbolism of seeds, gardening, and agriculture. The San Luis Reservoir is another example of the way in which the presence of water can have a soothing presence on people. Meanwhile, the fact that the people living around the reservoir are growing vegetables indicates a level of stability and hope that the characters have not yet encountered on the road. On a metaphorical level, Lauren's explanation of Earthseed connects to these themes of new life and hope.

Lauren tells Bankole that the "essentials" of Earthseed are learning to shape God, educating and supporting oneself and the community, and working to fulfill the Destiny. Bankole comments that Earthseed seems too "simple" and not mystical enough. Lauren acknowledges that Earthseed will change after she is gone, but that for now she wants to guide it into what she thinks it ought to be. Bankole notes that Lauren is an "unusual young woman." He tells her that his wife died five years ago, when addicts broke into their house and beat her, hoping to find drugs. They lived in a gated community, which, like Lauren's neighborhood, was also burned to the ground. Lauren asks Bankole if he's a doctor, and he says that he is. Lauren points out that "people always need doctors," and Bankole replies: "But here I am."

This passage explores the similarities and differences between Bankole and Lauren. Both of them have certain shared experiences, including living in a gated community that was destroyed and having their loved ones be killed. Both are intelligent, with a notably calm disposition in the midst of the chaos around them. However, not only is Bankole much older than Lauren, but he also seems to have a more passive attitude toward his fate. Whereas Lauren spends her time directing herself and others toward a specific vision of her future, Bankole's words ("But here I am") indicate a level of resignation.

Lauren believes that Bankole secretly has a place to go up north, or enough money to buy property. She fears that he will leave her, although she understands that they do not know each other well enough for total trust yet. The two of them look around at the peaceful setting of the lake. Bankole notes that such a place cannot last long. The two of them then take a blanket and find a secluded place to have sex. Lauren wonders how she survived so long without sexual intimacy and pleasure. Afterward, Bankole jokingly tells her that she'll be the death of him. Becoming more serious, he asks Lauren her age; when she tells him she is 18, he is horrified. He tells Lauren that she should be with someone younger, which makes her think of Curtis. Bankole notices that Lauren is overcome with sadness, and he asks about Curtis. Bankole comments that Lauren acts much older than her age.

The beginning of Lauren and Bankole's relationship is joyful, but—like all moments of happiness in the world of the novel—this joy is tainted by sadness. Lauren fears that Bankole is not being honest with her about the prospect of having somewhere to go up north, and thinks that he will leave her. Meanwhile, she is also reminded of Curtis, and by implication the entire community killed in the massacre. No matter how wonderful a new relationship may be, it cannot eradicate the loss and pain that characterizes life for everyone in the world of the novel.

In the next entry, Lauren writes that she has spent an entire day "talking, writing, reading, and making love to Bankole." Jill and Allie have begun joining Zahra's literacy lessons, and during the lesson the group discuss Earthseed. Bankole repeats his objection that Earthseed is "too simple" and needs some "mystical confusion." That evening, there is gunfire nearby, and the group all lie very still until it passes.

For a brief moment, Lauren's life appears to be almost idyllic. The community that she has now formed has a utopian quality, with people assisting one another and enjoying each other's company. However, this idyllic scene is still set against a continued backdrop of danger, violence, and destruction.

CHAPTER 22

Lauren writes that the group has been walking along the I-5 for a week. There are many human bones scattered along the freeway, though fewer living people walking alongside them. They pass through Sacramento, and that night encounter a group of young teenagers eating human flesh. Bankole mentions to Lauren that he is heading to Mendocino, where his sister and her family live in a property that Bankole owns. He invites Lauren to join him there, but Lauren predicts that his sister will object to her presence. Bankole explains that the property sits on 300 acres of farmland, all of which belongs to him, and that it's located in a secluded area far from the main road. His sister's name is Alexandra, and her husband is called Don Casey. They have three children aged 11, 13, and 15; Don works odd jobs to support the family, leaving Alexandra and the kids alone and without protection.

Lauren and Bankole's discussion of potentially starting a new life in Mendocino is jarringly contrasted with the image of the teenagers eating human flesh. Bankole's plan for what their life could be like on his farm sounds too good to be true, particularly given the intense violence and brutality that has surrounded them on their journey so far. By this point, it is painfully clear that the ordinary rules and expectations of life rarely apply anymore. Bankole may technically be the owner of the 300 acres of farmland he mentions, but in a world as chaotic and broken as the one they're in, this does not guarantee anything.

Bankole insists that Lauren comes with him to Mendocino. Lauren responds that she wants to accompany him, but that she is also "serious about Earthseed." She suggests that Bankole could help her found the first Earthseed community, and he teases her about fixing the world. This angers Lauren, who tells him not to laugh at her. Bankole agrees not to, and tells Lauren that he still wants her to come with him. He tells her that he wants to marry her once they are "settled," and that she can bring her "congregation" with them. Before Lauren answers, she tells him about her hyperempathy syndrome. Bankole says he has heard of the condition but never encountered anyone who has it. Lauren asks if he still wants to marry her, and Bankole laughs. He says that there is no chance he will "let her get away."

Lauren's whole life is orientated around her commitment to Earthseed, and even her growing feelings for Bankole are less important to her than realizing her vision of the first Earthseed community. Bankole pushes her to reorder her priorities by suggesting that they found the Earthseed community after getting married. However, for Lauren, beginning Earthseed is a matter of urgency. As a child and teenager, she was forced to keep her ideas quiet, knowing that she wouldn't be taken seriously. Now Lauren behaves as if there is no time to lose.

CHAPTER 23

During the night, there is more gunfire. For the first time, Lauren is able to ignore the sounds and simply sleep through it. In the morning, she notices that two people had snuck in and slept alongside the rest of the group in their camp. Lauren realizes that Jill had neglected her watch. The two intruders wake up: a young, brown-skinned woman with bedraggled hair and a child who could be either her daughter or sister. Frightened, the woman grabs the child and they curl up together in a ball. Lauren assures them that they won't hurt them and asks if they want something to eat. The woman says that they can't pay, but Lauren replies that this isn't necessary.

The group continues to expand in a somewhat haphazard manner. Although there is increased strength and security in numbers, it remains the case that one slip is enough to endanger the entire group. Fortunately, the intruders who arrived while Jill neglected her watch are seemingly non-threatening. At the same time, even incorporating harmless individuals into the community could pose a threat to the group's overall security.

Justin then walks over to play with the little girl, which breaks some of the tension. After they eat, the woman asks if she and the girl can come with the group, promising that they will work. Lauren calls the group to discuss this in private.

Members of the group need to have a certain level of physical ability, endurance, intelligence, and toughness in order to survive life on the road and not inadvertently endanger those around them.

There is some resistance among the group to the woman and child joining them; without thinking, Lauren mentions Bankole's plot of land. Eventually they agree to take them, but Travis and Lauren stress that such a lapse in the night watch cannot be allowed to happen again. At first Jill is defensive, but eventually promises to do better next time. Lauren learns that the woman's name is Emery Tanaka Solis; she is 23, half-black and half-Japanese, and formerly married to an older, Mexican husband. Tori, her daughter, is 9.

Themes of exclusion and inclusion again come into play here, as Lauren and the others must be ever vigilant about who to trust and who to reject or fear. The harsh reality of their world leaves no room for total openness or unguarded kindness.

Emery says that she and her husband had two sons in addition to Tori. The family worked as farmhands, but were paid in scrip and ended up in debt slavery. Emery's husband grew sick and died, and shortly after the boys were taken away. Emery then decided to run away from the farm. She dreamed of getting her sons back, but didn't know where they had been taken and soon realized that she could only take care of Tori now. They began walking north, and snuck into Lauren's camp after finding themselves near a gang fight.

Emery and Tori's story is strongly reminiscent of the era of chattel slavery in the United States. During this period, enslaved families were routinely torn apart, with children sold away from their mothers, never to be seen again. Just like an enslaved person in the antebellum United States, Emery has no power or resources to find her sons, and only a blind hope that they are still alive.

A few days later, another man, Grayson Mora, and his daughter, Doe, also join the group. Tori had befriended Doe, "pulling their parents together." Grayson appears to like Emery, but dislikes the group overall. Lauren is suspicious of him. She believes that he and Doe were also debt slaves, based on their similarities to Emery and Tori. Unprompted, Bankole also remarks that there is something strange about Grayson. Bankole says it's clear that Grayson doesn't trust the group, and that the best way to win him over will be by being kind to the children. Lauren notes that the group is now like a modern-day underground railroad. Bankole points out that debt slavery also existed in certain parts of the country in the 1990s. He says that Emery's sons were probably sold into prostitution, and Lauren adds that Emery must know this too. She concludes that if formerly enslaved people can be convinced to join Earthseed, they will fight harder for their freedom than anyone.

The addition of Grayson, Doe, Emery, and Tori to the group evokes an important connection to another part of American history—the underground railroad. As with the original underground railroad, Lauren's group operates as an ever-evolving informal network of support in the face of extreme danger. There is also a significant resemblance between Lauren and the most prominent hero of the underground railroad, Harriet Tubman. Both are extremely strong-willed, fierce, and courageous black American women who put themselves at great risk in order to bring about a brighter and more just future.

CHAPTER 24

After a distressing week, the group spend a morning discussing Earthseed. They are in a state of shock, exhaustion, and mourning. The previous Tuesday, Emery took Tori and Doe to pee in the bushes while the rest of the group ate. Suddenly, the group heard screams, and rushed to find Emery fighting a bald man, who was holding Tori. More bald people ran over from the freeway, holding weapons. Lauren shot the man holding Tori, and knew immediately that he was dead. Lauren got up briefly, before collapsing when someone else was shot and killed. Bankole rushed over to her and pointed out that she was bleeding, something Lauren herself had not noticed. He assured her that it was over. Lauren urged him to give her gun to Natividad just in case, before passing out again.

The idyllic moment of the previous chapter is violently interrupted in this scene. The addition of more children to the group appears to have made it more vulnerable to attack, particularly because the adults must focus on defending the children as well as themselves. Note that Lauren's hyperempathy makes it almost impossible for her to distinguish between her own injuries and those of other people. This further endangers her, yet at the same time the fact that she is used to feeling other people's pain appears to have allowed her to develop a higher tolerance for pain and more courage in general.

During this incident, Jill was killed. She had been carrying Tori and running toward the woods when she was shot. The group digs a shallow grave for Jill while Lauren is still unconscious. Lauren was also shot, but the bullet only grazed her, and Zahra assures her that Bankole won't let it get infected. Zahra points out that there was "something funny" about Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe; at that moment, Lauren realizes that they all have hyperempathy. Grayson comes over and asks Lauren how many times she "died" during the conflict. Lauren asks him if he would be willing to shoot people after learning how; she warns him that it "hurts like hell." Grayson mentions that the people who attacked them were pyro addicts. Lauren then briefly explains the rules of the community and asks if Grayson will follow them. He agrees.

In the midst of an intense moment of violent destruction, the community continues to grow. While they lose Jill, they gain an additional member in Grayson. This is particularly significant to Lauren, who earlier in the novel wrote in her diary that she wished she could live among other people who also have hyperempathy. Without realizing it, she has added four members to the community who all have the same condition. For the first time, Lauren is among people who understand what it is like to feel other people's pleasure and pain. This provides a moment of hope and relief in the midst of tragedy.

After leaving Grayson, Lauren goes to comfort Allie. Despite Allie's initial hostility, Lauren hugs her. Allie resists at first, but eventually gives in and begins moaning. After a while, Allie breaks away from Lauren and picks up Justin, carrying him as the group continues their walk. Later, Lauren discusses the incident with Emery and Bankole. Emery warns that the addicts will keep burning things until they use all the pyro they have. Lauren tells Emery that she knows she has hyperempathy, and asks if parents always give the condition to their children. Emery replies that this does not always happen; some children do not inherit it, and some "sharers" cannot have children at all. She adds that "bosses"—slaveholders—like when enslaved people have hyperempathy.

This passage provides a fuller image of hyperempathy, but also raises some important further questions about the condition. Emery's explanation that slaveholders like it when enslaved people have hyperempathy seems counterintuitive at best, and extremely sinister at worst. Do slaveholders want their slaves to experience extra pain for purely sadistic reasons, or is there another explanation? It is also worth noting that all the characters introduced so far with hyperempathy have black heritage. Although this doesn't mean anything definitively, it is still a significant fact.

The fires raging in the distance get nearer, and the group hurries away from them. They are unsure about whether they can outpace the encroaching smoke, but Lauren persuades them to stop and eat and drink a little in order to have enough energy to keep going. Lauren is careful to hide the fact that her wound is hurting, knowing that Grayson, Emery, and their children would feel her pain if she let on. The adults put the children in Bankole's cart and wrap wet fabric around their faces to avoid breathing in smoke. The hot flames, ash, and smoke draw nearer, and Lauren becomes convinced that they're all going to die. However, a wind starts to push the fire in a different direction, and the group emerge coughing and choking, but alive.

It is striking that after experiencing a large number of different attacks by people, the moment at which Lauren becomes convinced that the group are actually all going to die is when they face an environmental threat. On the other hand, it is also an environmental force that saves them from this fate. The fact that it is a gust of wind is particularly significant. On a symbolic level, wind represents a constant change—neither destructive (like fire) nor nourishing and soothing (like water). In this sense, wind can be seen as a representation of Lauren's idea of God.

When they stop to sleep, Grayson tells Lauren that he will watch with her, as her pain is keeping him awake anyway. Lauren refuses to give Grayson a gun, as he doesn't know how to shoot, which angers him. The next morning, the group passes a woman's corpse, which Emery strips in order to wear her clothes. Emery also finds cash in the woman's boots—the first real money she's ever owned. Later that day, the group reaches Clear Lake, where they buy more food. Emery splurges on pears and walnuts for the group, and Lauren notes that they would have to teach her about "the value of money." The next time Lauren writes, the group has reached Bankole's land. As Bankole promised, the property is very isolated. This is good for security, but will make earning money difficult. They reach the spot where the house is supposed to be, and find nothing; only the charred remains of a building.

The group has survived a series of trials befitting the Old Testament, only to find that their promised land is little more than a pile of ash. This tragic conclusion to their journey illustrates precisely what is so devastating about the destruction of people and land by fire—fire destroys the evidence of what was once there and how it met its demise. The group is now left with the same devastating sense of uncertainty regarding what happened to Bankole's family as Emery experienced with her sons and Lauren with her father. Are Bankole's family alive? Will they return? Will whoever burned down the farmhouse come back and attack the group again?

CHAPTER 25

The group have spent a week arguing over whether or not they should stay on Bankole's land among the ashes. They have found five skulls, likely the bones of Alexandra and her family. However, Bankole maintains some hope that they are still alive, and he and Harry go to the police to ask for help finding them. The police are suspicious and unhelpful. Bankole and Harry return with supplies, but no news of Alexandra. Lauren suggests holding a funeral and burying the bones, but Bankole refuses.

Once again the group are forced to negotiate between the beliefs and desires of each member, a daunting task. This is made all the more complicated by the number of unknown factors at play in their decision over whether to stay or leave. No one knows what happened to Bankole's family or whether there is any chance that they are still alive.

There is a citrus tree on the property, as well as patches of carrots and potatoes, and other trees growing fruit and nuts. Lauren believes that the group could start farming the land, planting the seeds she's carried from the neighborhood and breeding the few rabbits running around. However, other members of the group, such as Allie and Grayson, disagree. Lauren points out that there won't be anywhere safer the further north they go, and Zahra adds that Alexandra and her family must not have kept a good watch.

An even greater uncertainty for the group lies in the question of what awaits them further north. Some members of the group maintain hope that a more hospitable landscape lies waiting for them—yet this seems unlikely, given the fact that so far they have only encountered violence and destruction everywhere they have gone.

Harry says that there were no jobs in the local town when he and Bankole went to speak to the police; Lauren replies that it's more likely that the townspeople were suspicious of strangers, as there are surely many people who pass through the area. Bankole agrees, and adds that it will help if they can grow the food they sell, as "food is gold." Lauren makes a final case for staying, and Allie is the first to agree. Zahra also says she'll stay, but Harry remains resistant. He wants to buy land of his own, not live on Bankole's property. Bankole points out that the whole "rest of the world" is heading north, and thus land cannot possibly be cheap there. Emery suggests that Harry could get a job as a (slave) "driver," noting that there are factories that use drivers near the Canadian border. The others are horrified by this. Grayson agrees to stay, and at this point Harry also relents. He calls Lauren "crazy," but adds: "this is a crazy time."

The perspective of each member of the group has been shaped (and often hindered) by their own particular experiences. Bankole retains hope that there is a future on his land likely because he has positive memories of the place. Harry, meanwhile, is caught up in a sense of pride that is likely rooted in traditional understandings of masculinity. Finally, even though Emery was traumatized by her experience of enslavement, it is difficult for her to look past this experience and imagine alternative futures. All of the characters struggle to reconcile their desires and hopes for the future with their knowledge of reality.

Two days later, the group holds a funeral for Bankole's dead family members. Natividad wraps the bones in a shawl she made years ago, a gesture that Bankole finds so moving that he walks into the woods to cry alone. Lauren goes to find him there, and tells him she'd like to plant oak trees in honor of the dead. She suggests that all of the group should bury their dead in this ceremony, as everyone has left dead loved ones behind without a chance to say goodbye. She has enough acorns for each lost person.

The final moments of the novel are defined by a mix of optimism and pessimism. The intensity of the loss the group has experienced cannot be mitigated by the hope they now have about the future (as represented by the planting of the acorns).

Bankole remarks that it's a shame that Lauren is so young and didn't get a chance to see the country before it fell apart. Lauren says: "God is change," but Bankole replies that this "doesn't mean anything." He laments that the country still hasn't "hit bottom," but Lauren says their group will not sink any lower. Bankole's beard, and the serious expression on his face, remind Lauren of Frederick Douglass.

Finally accepting the fact that his family is dead, Bankole refuses to be consoled by Earthseed. At the same time, the presence of the acorns in the funeral serves as a reminder that in the midst of death and destruction, new life is blossoming. Even in the most tragic of circumstances, people have always been able to find enough hope to move forward—a fact emphasized by Lauren's observation that Bankole resembles Frederick Douglass.

The funeral takes place. Each member of the group shares memories of their loved ones; some read Bible passages, some Earthseed verses, while others recite poems or songs. They bury the bones and plant oak trees, and decide to call their new home "Acorn." The novel ends with the Parable of the Sower from the Bible, which is about a farmer who spreads some seed on bad ground and watches it die, but spreads other seed on good ground. This seed grows and flourishes.

It is possible to interpret the Biblical Parable of the Sower in multiple ways. However, the most prominent interpretation is that the parable emphasizes the importance of having a good heart or mindset (the "soil" from the parable) in order to receive Jesus's message and have faith in God. In the context of the book, then, this meaning must be slightly reinterpreted—the "faith" might mean Earthseed, and having a good and open heart is shown to be all the more difficult in the harsh, post-apocalyptic world of the novel.

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